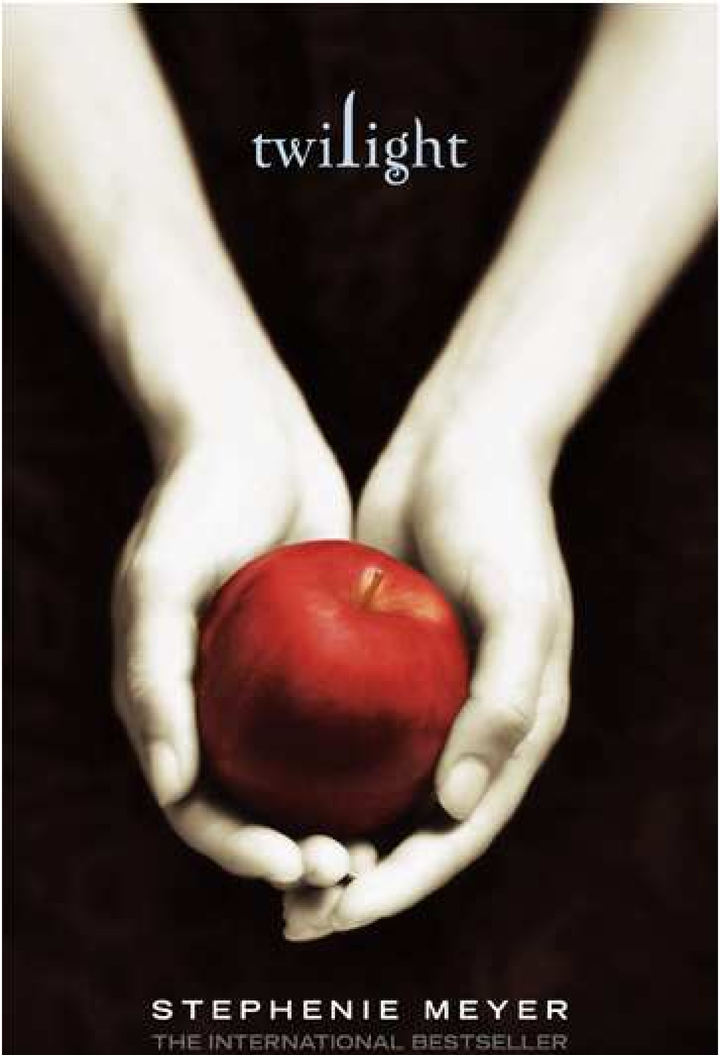

twilight
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THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

# Preface

I'd never given much thought to how I would die — though I'd had reason enough in the last few months — but even if I had, I would not have imagined it like this.

I stared without breathing across the long room, into the dark eyes of the hunter, and he looked pleasantly back at me.

Surely it was a good way to die, in the place of someone else, someone I loved. Noble, even. That ought to count for something.

I knew that if I'd never gone to Forks, I wouldn't be facing death now. But, terrified as I was, I couldn't bring myself to regret the decision. When life offers you a dream so far beyond any of your expectations, it's not reasonable to grieve when it comes to an end.

The hunter smiled in a friendly way as he sauntered forward to kill me.

# Chapter 1

## FIRST SIGHT

My mother drove me to the airport with the windows rolled down. It was seventy-five degrees in Phoenix, the sky a perfect, cloudless blue. I was wearing my favorite shirt — sleeveless, white eyelet lace; I was wearing it as a farewell gesture. My carry-on item was a parka.

In the Olympic Peninsula of northwest Washington State, a small town named Forks exists under a near-constant cover of clouds. It rains on this inconsequential town more than any other place in the United States of America. It was from this town and its gloomy, omnipresent shade that my mother escaped with me when I was only a few months old. It was in this town that I'd been compelled to spend a month every summer until I was fourteen. That was the year I finally put my foot down; these past three summers, my dad, Charlie, vacationed with me in California for two weeks instead.

It was to Forks that I now exiled myself— an action that I took with great horror. I detested Forks.

I loved Phoenix. I loved the sun and the blistering heat. I loved the vigorous, sprawling city.

"Bella," my mom said to me — the last of a thousand times — before I got on the plane. "You don't have to do this."

My mom looks like me, except with short hair and laugh lines. I felt a spasm of panic as I stared at her wide, childlike eyes. How could I leave my loving, erratic, harebrained mother to fend for herself? Of course she had Phil now, so the bills would probably get paid, there would be food in the refrigerator, gas in her car, and someone to call when she got lost, but still...

"I want to go," I lied. I'd always been a bad liar, but I'd been saying this lie so frequently lately that it sounded almost convincing now.

"Tell Charlie I said hi."

"I will."

"I'll see you soon," she insisted. "You can come home whenever you want — I'll come right back as soon as you need me."

But I could see the sacrifice in her eyes behind the promise.

"Don't worry about me," I urged. "It'll be great. I love you, Mom." She hugged me tightly for a minute, and then I got on the plane, and she was gone.

It's a four-hour flight from Phoenix to Seattle, another hour in a small plane up to Port Angeles, and then an hour drive back down to Forks. Flying doesn't bother me; the hour in the car with Charlie, though, I was a little worried about.

Charlie had really been fairly nice about the whole thing. He seemed genuinely pleased that I was coming to live with him for the first time with any degree of

permanence. He'd already gotten me registered for high school and was going to help me get a car.

But it was sure to be awkward with Charlie. Neither of us was what anyone would call verbose, and I didn't know what there was to say regardless. I knew he was more than a little confused by my decision — like my mother before me, I hadn't made a secret of my distaste for Forks. When I landed in Port Angeles, it was raining. I didn't see it as an omen — just unavoidable. I'd already said my goodbyes to the sun. Charlie was waiting for me with the cruiser. This I was expecting, too. Charlie is Police Chief Swan to the good people of Forks. My primary motivation behind buying a car, despite the scarcity of my funds, was that I refused to be driven around town in a car with red and blue lights on top. Nothing slows down traffic like a cop.

Charlie gave me an awkward, one-armed hug when I stumbled my way off the plane.

"It's good to see you, Bells," he said, smiling as he automatically caught and steadied me. "You haven't changed much. How's Renée?"

"Mom's fine. It's good to see you, too, Dad." I wasn't allowed to call him Charlie to his face.

I had only a few bags. Most of my Arizona clothes were too permeable for Washington. My mom and I had pooled our resources to supplement my winter wardrobe, but it was still scanty. It all fit easily into the trunk of the cruiser.

"I found a good car for you, really cheap," he announced when we were strapped in.

"What kind of car?" I was suspicious of the way he said "good car for you" as opposed to just "good car."

"Well, it's a truck actually, a Chevy."

"Where did you find it?"

"Do you remember Billy Black down at La Push?" La Push is the tiny Indian reservation on the coast.

"No."

"He used to go fishing with us during the summer," Charlie prompted. That would explain why I didn't remember him. I do a good job of blocking painful, unnecessary things from my memory.

"He's in a wheelchair now," Charlie continued when I didn't respond, "so he can't drive anymore, and he offered to sell me his truck cheap."

"What year is it?" I could see from his change of expression that this was the question he was hoping I wouldn't ask.

"Well, Billy's done a lot of work on the engine — it's only a few years old, really."

I hoped he didn't think so little of me as to believe I would give up that easily. "When did he buy it?"

"He bought it in 1984, I think."

"Did he buy it new?"

"Well, no. I think it was new in the early sixties — or late fifties at the earliest," he admitted sheepishly.

"Ch — Dad, I don't really know anything about cars. I wouldn't be able to fix it if anything went wrong, and I couldn't afford a mechanic..."

"Really, Bella, the thing runs great. They don't build them like that anymore."

The thing, I thought to myself... it had possibilities — as a nickname, at the very least.

"How cheap is cheap?" After all, that was the part I couldn't compromise on.

"Well, honey, I kind of already bought it for you. As a homecoming gift." Charlie peeked sideways at me with a hopeful expression.

Wow. Free.

"You didn't need to do that, Dad. I was going to buy myself a car."

"I don't mind. I want you to be happy here." He was looking ahead at the road when he said this. Charlie wasn't comfortable with expressing his emotions out loud. I inherited that from him. So I was looking straight ahead as I responded.

"That's really nice, Dad. Thanks. I really appreciate it." No need to add that my being happy in Forks is an impossibility. He didn't need to suffer along with me. And I never looked a free truck in the mouth — or engine.

"Well, now, you're welcome," he mumbled, embarrassed by my thanks. We exchanged a few more comments on the weather, which was wet, and that was pretty much it for Conversation. We stared out the windows in silence. It was beautiful, of course; I couldn't deny that. Everything was green: the trees, their trunks covered with moss, their branches hanging with a canopy of it, the ground covered with ferns. Even the air filtered down greenly through the leaves.

It was too green — an alien planet.

Eventually we made it to Charlie's. He still lived in the small, two-bedroom house that he'd bought with my mother in the early days of their marriage. Those were the only kind of days their marriage had — the early ones. There, parked on the street in front of the house that never changed, was my new — well, new to me — truck. It was a faded red color, with big, rounded fenders and a bulbous cab. To my intense surprise, I loved it. I didn't know if it would run, but I could see myself in it. Plus, it was one of those solid iron affairs that never gets damaged — the kind you see at the scene of an accident, paint unscratched, surrounded by the pieces of the foreign car it had destroyed.

"Wow, Dad, I love it! Thanks!" Now my horrific day tomorrow would be just that much less dreadful. I wouldn't be faced with the choice of either walking two miles in the rain to school or accepting a ride in the Chief's cruiser.

"I'm glad you like it," Charlie said gruffly, embarrassed again. It took only one trip to get all my

stuff upstairs. I got the west bedroom that faced out over the front yard. The room was familiar; it had been belonged to me since I was born. The wooden floor, the light blue walls, the peaked ceiling, the yellowed lace curtains around the window —

these were all a part of my childhood. The only changes Charlie had ever made were switching the crib for a bed and adding a desk as I grew. The desk now held a secondhand computer, with the phone line for the modem stapled along the floor to the nearest phone jack. This was a stipulation from my mother, so that we could stay in touch easily. The rocking chair from my baby days was still in the corner.

There was only one small bathroom at the top of the stairs, which I would have to share with Charlie. I was trying not to dwell too much on that fact.

One of the best things about Charlie is he doesn't hover. He left me alone to unpack and get settled, a feat that would have been altogether impossible for my mother. It was nice to be alone, not to have to smile and look pleased; a relief to stare dejectedly out the window at the sheeting rain and let just a few tears escape. I wasn't in the mood to go on a real crying jag. I would save that for bedtime, when I would have to think about the coming morning.

Forks High School had a frightening total of only three hundred and fifty-seven — now fifty-eight — students; there were more than seven hundred people in my junior class alone back home. All of the kids here had grown up together — their grandparents had

been toddlers together. I would be the new girl from the big city, a curiosity, a freak. Maybe, if I looked like a girl from Phoenix should, I could work this to my advantage. But physically, I'd never fit in anywhere. I should be tan, sporty, blond — a volleyball player, or a cheerleader, perhaps — all the things that go with living in the valley of the sun.

Instead, I was ivory-skinned, without even the excuse of blue eyes or red hair, despite the constant sunshine. I had always been slender, but soft somehow, obviously not an athlete; I didn't have the necessary hand-eye coordination to play sports without humiliating myself — and harming both myself and anyone else who stood too close.

When I finished putting my clothes in the old pine dresser, I took my bag of bathroom necessities and went to the communal bathroom to clean myself up after the day of travel. I looked at my face in the mirror as I brushed through my tangled, damp hair. Maybe it was the light, but already I looked sallower, unhealthy. My skin could be pretty — it was very clear, almost translucent-looking — but it all depended on color. I had no color here.

Facing my pallid reflection in the mirror, I was forced to admit that I was lying to myself. It wasn't just physically that I'd never fit in. And if I couldn't find a niche in a school with three thousand people, what were my chances here?

I didn't relate well to people my age. Maybe the truth was that I didn't relate well to people, period. Even my mother, who I was closer to than anyone else on the

planet, was never in harmony with me, never on exactly the same page. Sometimes I wondered if I was seeing the same things through my eyes that the rest of the world was seeing through theirs. Maybe there was a glitch in my brain. But the cause didn't matter. All that mattered was the effect. And tomorrow would be just the beginning. I didn't sleep well that night, even after I was done crying. The constant whooshing of the rain and wind across the roof wouldn't fade into the background. I pulled the faded old quilt over my head, and later added the pillow, too. But I couldn't fall asleep until after midnight, when the rain finally settled into a quieter drizzle.

Thick fog was all I could see out my window in the morning, and I could feel the claustrophobia creeping up on me. You could never see the sky here; it was like a cage.

Breakfast with Charlie was a quiet event. He wished me good luck at school. I thanked him, knowing his hope was wasted. Good luck tended to avoid me. Charlie left first, off to the police station that was his wife and family. After he left, I sat at the old square oak table in one of the three unmatching chairs and examined his small kitchen, with its dark paneled walls, bright yellow cabinets, and white linoleum floor. Nothing was changed. My mother had painted the cabinets eighteen years ago in an attempt to bring some sunshine into the house. Over the small fireplace in the adjoining handkerchief-sized family room was a row of pictures. First a wedding picture of Charlie and my mom in Las Vegas, then one of the three of us in the hospital after I was born, taken by a

helpful nurse, followed by the procession of my school pictures up to last year's. Those were embarrassing to look at — I would have to see what I could do to get Charlie to put them somewhere else, at least while I was living here.

It was impossible, being in this house, not to realize that Charlie had never gotten over my mom. It made me uncomfortable.

I didn't want to be too early to school, but I couldn't stay in the house anymore. I donned my jacket — which had the feel of a biohazard suit — and headed out into the rain.

It was just drizzling still, not enough to soak me through immediately as I reached for the house key that was always hidden under the eaves by the door, and locked up. The sloshing of my new waterproof boots was unnerving. I missed the normal crunch of gravel as I walked. I couldn't pause and admire my truck again as I wanted; I was in a hurry to get out of the misty wet that swirled around my head and clung to my hair under my hood.

Inside the truck, it was nice and dry. Either Billy or Charlie had obviously cleaned it up, but the tan upholstered seats still smelled faintly of tobacco, gasoline, and peppermint. The engine started quickly, to my relief, but loudly, roaring to life and then idling at top volume. Well, a truck this old was bound to have a flaw. The antique radio worked, a plus that I hadn't expected.

Finding the school wasn't difficult, though I'd never been there before. The school was, like most other

things, just off the highway. It was not obvious that it was a school; only the sign, which declared it to be the Forks High School, made me stop. It looked like a collection of matching houses, built with maroon-colored bricks. There were so many trees and shrubs I couldn't see its size at first. Where was the feel of the institution? I wondered nostalgically. Where were the chain-link fences, the metal detectors?

I parked in front of the first building, which had a small sign over the door reading front office. No one else was parked there, so I was sure it was off limits, but I decided I would get directions inside instead of circling around in the rain like an idiot. I stepped unwillingly out of the toasty truck cab and walked down a little stone path lined with dark hedges. I took a deep breath before opening the door.

Inside, it was brightly lit, and warmer than I'd hoped. The office was small; a little waiting area with padded folding chairs, orange-flecked commercial carpet, notices and awards cluttering the walls, a big clock ticking loudly. Plants grew everywhere in large plastic pots, as if there wasn't enough greenery outside. The room was cut in half by a long counter, cluttered with wire baskets full of papers and brightly colored flyers taped to its front. There were three desks behind the counter, one of which was manned by a large, red-haired woman wearing glasses. She was wearing a purple t-shirt, which immediately made me feel overdressed. The red-haired woman looked up. "Can I help you?"

"I'm Isabella Swan," I informed her, and saw the immediate awareness light her eyes. I was expected, a

topic of gossip no doubt. Daughter of the Chief's flighty ex-wife, come home at last.

"Of course," she said. She dug through a precariously stacked pile of documents on her desk till she found the ones she was looking for. "I have your schedule right here, and a map of the school." She brought several sheets to the counter to show roe.

She went through my classes for me, highlighting the best route to each on the map, and gave me a slip to have each teacher sign, which I was to bring back at the end of the day. She smiled at me and hoped, like Charlie, that I would like it here in Forks. I smiled back as convincingly as I could.

When I went back out to my truck, other students were starting to arrive. I drove around the school, following the line of traffic. I was glad to see that most of the cars were older like mine, nothing flashy. At home I'd lived in one of the few lower-income neighborhoods that were included in the Paradise Valley District. It was a common thing to see a new Mercedes or Porsche in the student lot. The nicest car here was a shiny Volvo, and it stood out. Still, I cut the engine as soon as I was in a spot, so that the thunderous volume wouldn't draw attention to me. I looked at the map in the truck, trying to memorize it now; hopefully I wouldn't have to walk around with it stuck in front of my nose all day. I stuffed everything in my bag, slung the strap over my shoulder, and sucked in a huge breath. I can do this, I lied to myself feebly. No one was going to bite me. I finally exhaled and stepped out of the truck. I kept my face pulled back into my hood as I walked to the sidewalk,

crowded with teenagers. My plain black jacket didn't stand out, I noticed with relief.

Once I got around the cafeteria, building three was easy to spot. A large black "3" was painted on a white square on the east corner. I felt my breathing gradually creeping toward hyperventilation as I approached the door. I tried holding my breath as I followed two unisex raincoats through the door.

The classroom was small. The people in front of me stopped just inside the door to hang up their coats on a long row of hooks. I copied them. They were two girls, one a porcelain-colored blonde, the other also pale, with light brown hair. At least my skin wouldn't be a standout here. I took the slip up to the teacher, a tall, balding man whose desk had a nameplate identifying him as Mr. Mason. He gawked at me when he saw my name — not an encouraging response — and of course I flushed tomato red. But at least he sent me to an empty desk at the back without introducing me to the class. It was harder for my new classmates to stare at me in the back, but somehow, they managed. I kept my eyes down on the reading list the teacher had given me. It was fairly basic: Bronte, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Faulkner. I'd already read everything. That was comforting… and boring. I wondered if my mom would send me my folder of old essays, or if she would think that was cheating. I went through different arguments with her in my head while the teacher droned on.

When the bell rang, a nasal buzzing sound, a gangly boy with skin problems and hair black as an oil slick leaned across the aisle to talk to me.

"You're Isabella Swan, aren't you?" He looked like the overly helpful, chess club type.

"Bella," I corrected. Everyone within a three-seat radius turned to look at me.

"Where's your next class?" he asked.

I had to check in my bag. "Um, Government, with Jefferson, in building six."

There was nowhere to look without meeting curious eyes.

"I'm headed toward building four, I could show you the way…" Definitely over-helpful. "I'm Eric," he added.

I smiled tentatively. "Thanks."

We got our jackets and headed out into the rain, which had picked up. I could have sworn several people behind us were walking close enough to eavesdrop. I hoped I wasn't getting paranoid.

"So, this is a lot different than Phoenix, huh?" he asked.

"Very."

"It doesn't rain much there, does it?"

"Three or four times a year."

"Wow, what must that be like?" he wondered.

"Sunny," I told him.

"You don't look very tan."

"My mother is part albino."

He studied my face apprehensively, and I sighed. It looked like clouds and a sense of humor didn't mix. A few months of this and I'd forget how to use sarcasm.

We walked back around the cafeteria, to the south buildings by the gym. Eric walked me right to the door, though it was clearly marked.

"Well, good luck," he said as I touched the handle. "Maybe we'll have some other classes together." He sounded hopeful.

I smiled at him vaguely and went inside.

The rest of the morning passed in about the same fashion. My Trigonometry teacher, Mr. Varner, who I would have hated anyway just because of the subject he taught, was the only one who made me stand in front of the class and introduce myself. I stammered, blushed, and tripped over my own boots on the way to my seat.

After two classes, I started to recognize several of the faces in each class. There was always someone braver than the others who would introduce themselves and ask me questions about how I was liking Forks. I tried to be diplomatic, but mostly I just lied a lot. At least I never needed the map.

One girl sat next to me in both Trig and Spanish, and she walked with me to the cafeteria for lunch. She was tiny, several inches shorter than my five feet four inches, but her wildly curly dark hair made up a lot of the difference between our heights. I couldn't

remember her name, so I smiled and nodded as she prattled about teachers and classes. I didn't try to keep up.

We sat at the end of a full table with several of her friends, who she introduced to me. I forgot all their names as soon as she spoke them. They seemed impressed by her bravery in speaking to me. The boy from English, Eric, waved at me from across the room.

It was there, sitting in the lunchroom, trying to make conversation with seven curious strangers, that I first saw them.

They were sitting in the corner of the cafeteria, as far away from where I sat as possible in the long room. There were five of them. They weren't talking, and they weren't eating, though they each had a tray of untouched food in front of them. They weren't gawking at me, unlike most of the other students, so it was safe to stare at them without fear of meeting an excessively interested pair of eyes. But it was none of these things that caught, and held, my attention.

They didn't look anything alike. Of the three boys, one was big — muscled like a serious weight lifter, with dark, curly hair. Another was taller, leaner, but still muscular, and honey blond. The last was lanky, less bulky, with untidy, bronze-colored hair. He was more boyish than the others, who looked like they could be in college, or even teachers here rather than students.

The girls were opposites. The tall one was statuesque. She had a beautiful figure, the kind you saw on the cover of the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue, the

kind that made every girl around her take a hit on her self-esteem just by being in the same room. Her hair was golden, gently waving to the middle of her back. The short girl was pixielike, thin in the extreme, with small features. Her hair was a deep black, cropped short and pointing in every direction.

And yet, they were all exactly alike. Every one of them was chalky pale, the palest of all the students living in this sunless town. Paler than me, the albino. They all had very dark eyes despite the range in hair tones. They also had dark shadows under those eyes — purplish, bruiselike shadows. As if they were all suffering from a sleepless night, or almost done recovering from a broken nose. Though their noses, all their features, were straight, perfect, angular.

But all this is not why I couldn't look away.

I stared because their faces, so different, so similar, were all devastatingly, inhumanly beautiful. They were faces you never expected to see except perhaps on the airbrushed pages of a fashion magazine. Or painted by an old master as the face of an angel. It was hard to decide who was the most beautiful — maybe the perfect blond girl, or the bronze-haired boy.

They were all looking away — away from each other, away from the other students, away from anything in particular as far as I could tell. As I watched, the small girl rose with her tray — unopened soda, unbitten apple — and walked away with a quick, graceful lope that belonged on a runway. I watched, amazed at her lithe dancer's step, till she dumped her

tray and glided through the back door, faster than I would have thought possible. My eyes darted back to the others, who sat unchanging.

"Who are they?" I asked the girl from my Spanish class, whose name I'd forgotten.

As she looked up to see who I meant — though already knowing, probably, from my tone — suddenly he looked at her, the thinner one, the boyish one, the youngest, perhaps. He looked at my neighbor for just a fraction of a second, and then his dark eyes flickered to mine.

He looked away quickly, more quickly than I could, though in a flush of embarrassment I dropped my eyes at once. In that brief flash of a glance, his face held nothing of interest — it was as if she had called his name, and he'd looked up in involuntary response, already having decided not to answer.

My neighbor giggled in embarrassment, looking at the table like I did.

"That's Edward and Emmett Cullen, and Rosalie and Jasper Hale. The one who left was Alice Cullen; they all live together with Dr. Cullen and his wife." She said this under her breath.

I glanced sideways at the beautiful boy, who was looking at his tray now, picking a bagel to pieces with long, pale fingers. His mouth was moving very quickly, his perfect lips barely opening. The other three still looked away, and yet I felt he was speaking quietly to them. Strange, unpopular names, I thought. The kinds of names grandparents had. But

maybe that was in vogue here — small town names? I finally remembered that my neighbor was called Jessica, a perfectly common name. There were two girls named Jessica in my History class back home.

"They are... very nice-looking." I struggled with the conspicuous understatement.

"Yes!" Jessica agreed with another giggle. "They're all together though — Emmett and Rosalie, and Jasper and Alice, I mean. And they live together." Her voice held all the shock and condemnation of the small town, I thought critically. But, if I was being honest, I had to admit that even in Phoenix, it would cause gossip.

"Which ones are the Cullens?" I asked. "They don't look related..."

"Oh, they're not. Dr. Cullen is really young, in his twenties or early thirties. They're all adopted. The Hales are brother and sister, twins — the blondes — and they're foster children."

"They look a little old for foster children."

"They are now, Jasper and Rosalie are both eighteen, but they've been with Mrs. Cullen since they were eight. She's their aunt or something like that."

"That's really kind of nice — for them to take care of all those kids like that, when they're so young and everything."

"I guess so," Jessica admitted reluctantly, and I got the impression that she didn't like the doctor and his wife for some reason. With the glances she was

throwing at their adopted children, I would presume the reason was jealousy. "I think that Mrs. Cullen can't have any kids, though," she added, as if that lessened their kindness.

Throughout all this conversation, my eyes flickered again and again to the table where the strange family sat. They continued to look at the walls and not eat.

"Have they always lived in Forks?" I asked. Surely I would have noticed them on one of my summers here.

"No," she said in a voice that implied it should be obvious, even to a new arrival like me. "They just moved down two years ago from somewhere in Alaska."

I felt a surge of pity, and relief. Pity because, as beautiful as they were, they were outsiders, clearly not accepted. Relief that I wasn't the only newcomer here, and certainly not the most interesting by any standard.

As I examined them, the youngest, one of the Cullens, looked up and met my gaze, this time with evident curiosity in his expression. As I looked swiftly away, it seemed to me that his glance held some kind of unmet expectation.

"Which one is the boy with the reddish brown hair?" I asked. I peeked at him from the corner of my eye, and he was still staring at me, but not gawking like the other students had today — he had a slightly frustrated expression. I looked down again.

"That's Edward. He's gorgeous, of course, but don't waste your time. He doesn't date. Apparently none of the girls here are good-looking enough for him." She sniffed, a clear case of sour grapes. I wondered when he'd turned her down.

I bit my lip to hide my smile. Then I glanced at him again. His face was turned away, but I thought his cheek appeared lifted, as if he were smiling, too.

After a few more minutes, the four of them left the table together. They all were noticeably graceful — even the big, brawny one. It was unsettling to watch. The one named Edward didn't look at me again. I sat at the table with Jessica and her friends longer than I would have if I'd been sitting alone. I was anxious not to be late for class on my first day. One of my new acquaintances, who considerately reminded me that her name was Angela, had Biology II with me the next hour. We walked to class together in silence. She was shy, too.

When we entered the classroom, Angela went to sit at a black-topped lab table exactly like the ones I was used to. She already had a neighbor. In fact, all the tables were filled but one. Next to the center aisle, I recognized Edward Cullen by his unusual hair, sitting next to that single open seat.

As I walked down the aisle to introduce myself to the teacher and get my slip signed, I was watching him surreptitiously. Just as I passed, he suddenly went rigid in his seat. He stared at me again, meeting my eyes with the strangest expression on his face — it was hostile, furious. I looked away quickly, shocked,

going red again. I stumbled over a book in the walkway and had to catch myself on the edge of a table. The girl sitting there giggled.

I'd noticed that his eyes were black — coal black.

Mr. Banner signed my slip and handed me a book with no nonsense about introductions. I could tell we were going to get along. Of course, he had no choice but to send me to the one open seat in the middle of the room. I kept my eyes down as I went to sit by him, bewildered by the antagonistic stare he'd given me.

I didn't look up as I set my book on the table and took my seat, but I saw his posture change from the corner of my eye. He was leaning away from me, sitting on the extreme edge of his chair and averting his face like he smelled something bad. Inconspicuously, I sniffed my hair. It smelled like strawberries, the scent of my favorite shampoo. It seemed an innocent enough odor. I let my hair fall over my right shoulder, making a dark curtain between us, and tried to pay attention to the teacher. Unfortunately the lecture was on cellular anatomy, something I'd already studied. I took notes carefully anyway, always looking down. I couldn't stop myself from peeking occasionally through the screen of my hair at the strange boy next to me. During the whole class, he never relaxed his stiff position on the edge of his chair, sitting as far from me as possible. I could see his hand on his left leg was clenched into a fist, tendons standing out under his pale skin. This, too, he never relaxed. He had the long sleeves of his white shirt pushed up to his elbows, and his forearm was surprisingly hard and muscular beneath his light

skin. He wasn't nearly as slight as he'd looked next to his burly brother.

The class seemed to drag on longer than the others. Was it because the day was finally coming to a close, or because I was waiting for his tight fist to loosen? It never did; he continued to sit so still it looked like he wasn't breathing. What was wrong with him? Was this his normal behavior? I questioned my judgment on Jessica's bitterness at lunch today. Maybe she was not as resentful as I'd thought.

It couldn't have anything to do with me. He didn't know me from Eve. I peeked up at him one more time, and regretted it. He was glaring down at me again, his black eyes full of revulsion. As I flinched away from him, shrinking against my chair, the phrase if looks could kill suddenly ran through my mind.

At that moment, the bell rang loudly, making me jump, and Edward Cullen was out of his seat. Fluidly he rose — he was much taller than I'd thought — his back to me, and he was out the door before anyone else was out of their seat.

I sat frozen in my seat, staring blankly after him. He was so mean. It wasn't fair. I began gathering up my things slowly, trying to block the anger that filled me, for fear my eyes would tear up. For some reason, my temper was hardwired to my tear ducts. I usually cried when I was angry, a humiliating tendency.

"Aren't you Isabella Swan?" a male voice asked. I looked up to see a cute, baby-faced boy, his pale blond hair carefully gelled into orderly spikes, smiling

at me in a friendly way. He obviously didn't think I smelled bad.

"Bella," I corrected him, with a smile.

"I'm Mike."

"Hi, Mike."

"Do you need any help finding your next class?"

"I'm headed to the gym, actually. I think I can find it."

"That's my next class, too." He seemed thrilled, though it wasn't that big of a coincidence in a school this small.

We walked to class together; he was a chatterer — he supplied most of the conversation, which made it easy for me. He'd lived in California till he was ten, so he knew how I felt about the sun. It turned out he was in my English class also. He was the nicest person I'd met today. But as we were entering the gym, he asked, "So, did you stab Edward Cullen with a pencil or what? I've never seen him act like that." I cringed. So I wasn't the only one who had noticed. And, apparently, that wasn't Edward Cullen's usual behavior. I decided to play dumb.

"Was that the boy I sat next to in Biology?" I asked artlessly.

"Yes," he said. "He looked like he was in pain or something."

"I don't know," I responded. "I never spoke to him."

"He's a weird guy." Mike lingered by me instead of heading to the dressing room. "If I were lucky enough to sit by you, I would have talked to you."

I smiled at him before walking through the girls' locker room door. He was friendly and clearly admiring. But it wasn't enough to ease my irritation.

The Gym teacher, Coach Clapp, found me a uniform but didn't make me dress down for today's class. At home, only two years of RE. were required. Here, P.E. was mandatory all four years. Forks was literally my personal hell on Earth.

I watched four volleyball games running simultaneously. Remembering how many injuries I had sustained — and inflicted — playing volleyball, I felt faintly nauseated.

The final bell rang at last. I walked slowly to the office to return my paperwork. The rain had drifted away, but the wind was strong, and colder. I wrapped my arms around myself.

When I walked into the warm office, I almost turned around and walked back out.

Edward Cullen stood at the desk in front of me. I recognized again that tousled bronze hair. He didn't appear to notice the sound of my entrance. I stood pressed against the back wall, waiting for the receptionist to be free.

He was arguing with her in a low, attractive voice. I quickly picked up the gist of the argument. He was

trying to trade from sixth-hour Biology to another time — any other time.

I just couldn't believe that this was about me. It had to be something else, something that happened before I entered the Biology room. The look on his face must have been about another aggravation entirely. It was impossible that this stranger could take such a sudden, intense dislike to me.

The door opened again, and the cold wind suddenly gusted through the room, rustling the papers on the desk, swirling my hair around my face. The girl who came in merely stepped to the desk, placed a note in the wire basket, and walked out again. But Edward Cullen's back stiffened, and he turned slowly to glare at me — his face was absurdly handsome — with piercing, hate-filled eyes. For an instant, I felt a thrill of genuine fear, raising the hair on my arms. The look only lasted a second, but it chilled me more than the freezing wind. He turned back to the receptionist.

"Never mind, then," he said hastily in a voice like velvet. "I can see that it's impossible. Thank you so much for your help." And he turned on his heel without another look at me, and disappeared out the door. I went meekly to the desk, my face white for once instead of red, and handed her the signed slip.

"How did your first day go, dear?" the receptionist asked maternally.

"Fine," I lied, my voice weak. She didn't look convinced. When I got to the truck, it was almost the last car in the lot. It seemed like a haven, already the closest thing to home I had in this damp green hole. I

sat inside for a while, just staring out the windshield blankly. But soon I was cold enough to need the heater, so I turned the key and the engine roared to life. I headed back to Charlie's house, fighting tears the whole way there.

# Chapter 2

## OPEN BOOK

The next day was better... and worse.

It was better because it wasn't raining yet, though the clouds were dense and opaque. It was easier because I knew what to expect of my day. Mike came to sit by me in English, and walked me to my next class, with Chess Club Eric glaring at him all the while; that was nattering. People didn't look at me quite as much as they had yesterday. I sat with a big group at lunch that included Mike, Eric, Jessica, and several other people whose names and faces I now remembered. I began to feel like I was treading water, instead of drowning in it.

It was worse because I was tired; I still couldn't sleep with the wind echoing around the house. It was worse because Mr. Varner called on me in Trig when my hand wasn't raised and I had the wrong answer. It was miserable because I had to play volleyball, and the one time I didn't cringe out of the way of the ball, I hit my teammate in the head with it. And it was worse because Edward Cullen wasn't in school at all. All morning I was dreading lunch, fearing his bizarre glares. Part of me wanted to confront him and demand to know what his problem was. While I was lying sleepless in my bed, I even imagined what I would say. But I knew myself too well to think I would really have the guts to do it. I made the Cowardly Lion look like the terminator.

But when I walked into the cafeteria with Jessica — trying to keep my eyes from sweeping the place for him, and failing entirely — I saw that his four siblings of sorts were sitting together at the same table, and he was not with them.

Mike intercepted us and steered us to his table. Jessica seemed elated by the attention, and her friends quickly joined us. But as I tried to listen to their easy chatter, I was terribly uncomfortable, waiting nervously for the moment he would arrive. I hoped that he would simply ignore me when he came, and prove my suspicions false.

He didn't come, and as time passed I grew more and more tense. I walked to Biology with more confidence when, by the end of lunch, he still hadn't showed. Mike, who was taking on the qualities of a golden retriever, walked faithfully by my side to class. I held my breath at the door, but Edward Cullen wasn't there, either. I exhaled and went to my seat. Mike followed, talking about an upcoming trip to the beach. He lingered by my desk till the bell rang. Then he smiled at me wistfully and went to sit by a girl with braces and a bad perm. It looked like I was going to have to do something about Mike, and it wouldn't be easy. In a town like this, where everyone lived on top of everyone else, diplomacy was essential. I had never been enormously tactful; I had no practice dealing with overly friendly boys.

I was relieved that I had the desk to myself, that Edward was absent. I told myself that repeatedly. But I couldn't get rid of the nagging suspicion that I was the reason he wasn't there. It was ridiculous, and

egotistical, to think that I could affect anyone that strongly. It was impossible. And yet I couldn't stop worrying that it was true. When the school day was finally done, and the blush was fading out of my cheeks from the volleyball incident, I changed quickly back into my jeans and navy blue sweater. I hurried from the girls' locker room, pleased to find that I had successfully evaded my retriever friend for the moment. I walked swiftly out to the parking lot. It was crowded now with fleeing students. I got in my truck and dug through my bag to make sure I had what I needed.

Last night I'd discovered that Charlie couldn't cook much besides fried eggs and bacon. So I requested that I be assigned kitchen detail for the duration of my stay. He was willing enough to hand over the keys to the banquet hall. I also found out that he had no food in the house. So I had my shopping list and the cash from the jar in the cupboard labeled FOOD

MONEY, and I was on my way to the Thriftway.

I gunned my deafening engine to life, ignoring the heads that turned in my direction, and backed carefully into a place in the line of cars that were waiting to exit the parking lot. As I waited, trying to pretend that the earsplitting rumble was coming from someone else's car, I saw the two Cullens and the Hale twins getting into their car. It was the shiny new Volvo. Of course. I hadn't noticed their clothes before — I'd been too mesmerized by their faces. Now that I looked, it was obvious that they were all dressed exceptionally well; simply, but in clothes that subtly hinted at designer origins. With their remarkable good

looks, the style with which they carried themselves, they could have worn dishrags and pulled it off. It seemed excessive for them to have both looks and money. But as far as I could tell, life worked that way most of the time. It didn't look as if it bought them any acceptance here.

No, I didn't fully believe that. The isolation must be their desire; I couldn't imagine any door that wouldn't be opened by that degree of beauty.

They looked at my noisy truck as I passed them, just like everyone else. I kept my eyes straight forward and was relieved when I finally was free of the school grounds.

The Thriftway was not far from the school, just a few streets south, off the highway. It was nice to be inside the supermarket; it felt normal. I did the shopping at home, and I fell into the pattern of the familiar task gladly. The store was big enough inside that I couldn't hear the tapping of the rain on the roof to remind me where I was. When I got home, I unloaded all the groceries, stuffing them in wherever I could find an open space. I hoped Charlie wouldn't mind. I wrapped potatoes in foil and stuck them in the oven to bake, covered a steak in marinade and balanced it on top of a carton of eggs in the fridge. When I was finished with that, I took my book bag upstairs. Before starting my homework, I changed into a pair of dry sweats, pulled my damp hair up into a pony-tail, and checked my e-mail for the first time. I had three messages.

"Bella," my mom wrote...

Write me as soon as you get in. Tell me how your flight was. Is it raining? I miss you already. I'm almost finished packing for Florida, but I can't find my pink blouse. Do you know where I put it? Phil says hi. Mom.

I sighed and went to the next. It was sent eight hours after the first.

"Bella," she wrote...

Why haven't you e-mailed me yet? What are you waiting for? Mom. The last was from this morning.

Isabella,

If I haven't heard from you by 5:30 p.m. today I'm calling Charlie. I checked the clock. I still had an hour, but my mom was well known for jumping the gun.

Mom,

Calm down. I'm writing right now. Don't do anything rash. Bella.

I sent that, and began again.

Mom,

Everything is great. Of course it's raining. I was waiting for something to write about. School isn't bad, just a little repetitive. I met some nice kids who sit by me at lunch.

Your blouse is at the dry cleaners - you were supposed to pick it up Friday.

Charlie bought me a truck, can you believe it? I love it. It's old, but really sturdy, which is good, you know, for me.

I miss you, too. I'll write again soon, but I'm not going to check my e-mail every five minutes. Relax, breathe. I love you.

Bella.

I had decided to read Wuthering Heights — the novel we were currently studying in English — yet again for the fun of it, and that's what I was doing when Charlie came home. I'd lost track of the time, and I hurried downstairs to take the potatoes out and put the steak in to broil.

"Bella?" my father called out when he heard me on the stairs. Who else? I thought to myself.

"Hey, Dad, welcome home."

"Thanks." He hung up his gun belt and stepped out of his boots as I bustled about the kitchen. As far as I was aware, he'd never shot the gun on the job. But he kept it ready. When I came here as a child, he would always remove the bullets as soon as he walked in the door. I guess he considered me old enough now not to shoot myself by accident, and not depressed enough to shoot myself on purpose.

"What's for dinner?" he asked warily. My mother was an imaginative cook, and her experiments weren't always edible. I was surprised, and sad, that he seemed to remember that far back.

"Steak and potatoes," I answered, and he looked relieved. He seemed to feel awkward standing in the kitchen doing nothing; he lumbered into the living room to watch TV while I worked. We were both more comfortable that way. I made a salad while the steaks cooked, and set the table.

I called him in when dinner was ready, and he sniffed appreciatively as he walked into the room.

"Smells good, Bell."

"Thanks."

We ate in silence for a few minutes. It wasn't uncomfortable. Neither of us was bothered by the quiet. In some ways, we were well suited for living together.

"So, how did you like school? Have you made any friends?" he asked as he was taking seconds.

"Well, I have a few classes with a girl named Jessica. I sit with her friends at lunch. And there's this boy, Mike, who's very friendly. Everybody seems pretty nice." With one outstanding exception.

"That must be Mike Newton. Nice kid — nice family. His dad owns the sporting goods store just outside of town. He makes a good living off all the backpackers who come through here."

"Do you know the Cullen family?" I asked hesitantly.

"Dr. Cullen's family? Sure. Dr. Cullen's a great man."

"They... the kids... are a little different. They don't seem to fit in very well at school."

Charlie surprised me by looking angry.

"People in this town," he muttered. "Dr. Cullen is a brilliant surgeon who could probably work in any hospital in the world, make ten times the salary he gets here," he continued, getting louder. "We're lucky to have him — lucky that his wife wanted to live in a small town. He's an asset to the community, and all of those kids are well behaved and polite. I had my doubts, when they first moved in, with all those adopted teenagers. I thought we might have some problems with them. But they're all very mature — I haven't had one speck of trouble from any of them. That's more than I can say for the children of some folks who have lived in this town for generations. And they stick together the way a family should — camping trips every other weekend... Just because they're newcomers, people have to talk."

It was the longest speech I'd ever heard Charlie make. He must feel strongly about whatever people were saying.

I backpedaled. "They seemed nice enough to me. I just noticed they kept to themselves. They're all very attractive," I added, trying to be more complimentary.

"You should see the doctor," Charlie said, laughing. "It's a good thing he's happily married. A lot of the nurses at the hospital have a hard time concentrating on their work with him around."

We lapsed back into silence as we finished eating. He cleared the table while I started on the dishes. He went back to the TV, and after I finished washing the dishes by hand — no dishwasher — I went upstairs unwillingly to work on my math homework. I could feel a tradition in the making.

That night it was finally quiet. I fell asleep quickly, exhausted. The rest of the week was uneventful. I got used to the routine of my classes. By Friday I was able to recognize, if not name, almost all the students at school. In Gym, the kids on my team learned not to pass me the ball and to step quickly in front of me if the other team tried to take advantage of my weakness. I happily stayed out of their way. Edward Cullen didn't come back to school.

Every day, I watched anxiously until the rest of the Cullens entered the cafeteria without him. Then I could relax and join in the lunchtime conversation. Mostly it centered around a trip to the La Push Ocean Park in two weeks that Mike was putting together. I was invited, and I had agreed to go, more out of politeness than desire. Beaches should be hot and dry.

By Friday I was perfectly comfortable entering my Biology class, no longer worried that Edward would be there. For all I knew, he had dropped out of school. I tried not to think about him, but I couldn't totally suppress the worry that I was responsible for his continued absence, ridiculous as it seemed.

My first weekend in Forks passed without incident. Charlie, unused to spending time in the usually

empty house, worked most of the weekend. I cleaned the house, got ahead on my homework, and wrote my mom more bogusly cheerful e-mail. I did drive to the library Saturday, but it was so poorly stocked that I didn't bother to get a card; I would have to make a date to visit Olympia or Seattle soon and find a good bookstore. I wondered idly what kind of gas mileage the truck got… and shuddered at the thought.

The rain stayed soft over the weekend, quiet, so I was able to sleep well. People greeted me in the parking lot Monday morning. I didn't know all their names, but I waved back and smiled at everyone. It was colder this morning, but happily not raining. In English, Mike took his accustomed seat by my side. We had a pop quiz on Wuthering Heights. It was straightforward, very easy.

All in all, I was feeling a lot more comfortable than I had thought I would feel by this point. More comfortable than I had ever expected to feel here.

When we walked out of class, the air was full of swirling bits of white. I could hear people shouting excitedly to each other. The wind bit at my cheeks, my nose.

"Wow," Mike said. "It's snowing."

I looked at the little cotton fluffs that were building up along the sidewalk and swirling erratically past my face.

"Ew." Snow. There went my good day.

He looked surprised. "Don't you like snow?"

"No. That means it's too cold for rain." Obviously. "Besides, I thought it was supposed to come down in flakes — you know, each one unique and all that. These just look like the ends of Q-tips."

"Haven't you ever seen snow fall before?" he asked incredulously.

"Sure I have." I paused. "On TV."

Mike laughed. And then a big, squishy ball of dripping snow smacked into the back of his head. We both turned to see where it came from. I had my suspicions about Eric, who was walking away, his back toward us — in the wrong direction for his next class. Mike appatently had the same notion. He bent over and began scraping together a pile of the white mush.

"I'll see you at lunch, okay?" I kept walking as I spoke. "Once people start throwing wet stuff, I go inside."

He just nodded, his eyes on Eric's retreating figure.

Throughout the morning, everyone chattered excitedly about the snow; apparently it was the first snowfall of the new year. I kept my mouth shut. Sure, it was drier than rain — until it melted in your socks. I walked alertly to the cafeteria with Jessica after Spanish. Mush balls were flying everywhere. I kept a binder in my hands, ready to use it as a shield if necessary. Jessica thought I was hilarious, but something in my expression kept her from lobbing a snowball at me herself. Mike caught up to us as we walked in the doors, laughing, with ice melting the

spikes in his hair. He and Jessica were talking animatedly about the snow fight as we got in line to buy food. I glanced toward that table in the corner out of habit. And then I froze where I stood. There were five people at the table.

Jessica pulled on my arm.

"Hello? Bella? What do you want?"

I looked down; my ears were hot. I had no reason to feel self-conscious, I reminded myself. I hadn't done anything wrong.

"What's with Bella?" Mike asked Jessica.

"Nothing," I answered. "I'll just get a soda today." I caught up to the end of the line.

"Aren't you hungry?" Jessica asked.

"Actually, I feel a little sick," I said, my eyes still on the floor. I waited for them to get their food, and then followed them to a table, my eyes on my feet.

I sipped my soda slowly, my stomach churning. Twice Mike asked, with unnecessary concern, how I was feeling.

I told him it was nothing, but I was wondering if I should play it up and escape to the nurse's office for the next hour.

Ridiculous. I shouldn't have to run away.

I decided to permit myself one glance at the Cullen family's table. If he was glaring at me, I would skip Biology, like the coward I was. I kept my head down

and glanced up under my lashes. None of them were looking this way. I lifted my head a little.

They were laughing. Edward, Jasper, and Emmett all had their hair entirely saturated with melting snow. Alice and Rosalie were leaning away as Emmett shook his dripping hair toward them. They were enjoying the snowy day, just like everyone else — only they looked more like a scene from a movie than the rest of us.

But, aside from the laughter and playfulness, there was something different, and I couldn't quite pinpoint what that difference was. I examined Edward the most carefully. His skin was less pale, I decided — flushed from the snow fight maybe — the circles under his eyes much less noticeable. But there was something more. I pondered, staring, trying to isolate the change.

"Bella, what are you staring at?" Jessica intruded, her eyes following my stare.

At that precise moment, his eyes flashed over to meet mine. I dropped my head, letting my hair fall to conceal my face. I was sure, though, in the instant our eyes met, that he didn't look harsh or unfriendly as he had the last time I'd seen him. He looked merely curious again, unsatisfied in some way.

"Edward Cullen is staring at you," Jessica giggled in my ear.

"He doesn't look angry, does he?" I couldn't help asking.

"No," she said, sounding confused by my question. "Should he be?"

"I don't think he likes me," I confided. I still felt queasy. I put my head down on my arm.

"The Cullens don't like anybody... well, they don't notice anybody enough to like them. But he's still staring at you."

"Stop looking at him," I hissed.

She snickered, but she looked away. I raised my head enough to make sure that she did, contemplating violence if she resisted.

Mike interrupted us then — he was planning an epic battle of the blizzard in the parking lot after school and wanted us to join. Jessica agreed enthusiastically. The way she looked at Mike left little doubt that she would be up for anything he suggested. I kept silent. I would have to hide in the gym until the parking lot cleared.

For the rest of the lunch hour I very carefully kept my eyes at my own table. I decided to honor the bargain I'd made with myself. Since he didn't look angry, I would go to Biology. My stomach did frightened little flips at the thought of sitting next to him again. I didn't really want to walk to class with Mike as usual — he seemed to be a popular target for the snowball snipers — but when we went to the door, everyone besides me groaned in unison. It was raining, washing all traces of the snow away in clear, icy ribbons down the side of the walkway. I pulled my

hood up, secretly pleased. I would be free to go straight home after Gym.

Mike kept up a string of complaints on the way to building four. Once inside the classroom, I saw with relief that my table was still empty. Mr. Banner was walking around the room, distributing one microscope and box of slides to each table. Class didn't start for a few minutes, and the room buzzed with conversation. I kept my eyes away from the door, doodling idly on the cover of my notebook.

I heard very clearly when the chair next to me moved, but my eyes stayed carefully focused on the pattern I was drawing.

"Hello," said a quiet, musical voice.

I looked up, stunned that he was speaking to me. He was sitting as far away from me as the desk allowed, but his chair was angled toward me. His hair was dripping wet, disheveled — even so, he looked like he'd just finished shooting a commercial for hair gel. His dazzling face was friendly, open, a slight smile on his flawless lips. But his eyes were careful.

"My name is Edward Cullen," he continued. "I didn't have a chance to introduce myself last week. You must be Bella Swan." My mind was spinning with confusion. Had I made up the whole thing? He was perfectly polite now. I had to speak; he was waiting. But I couldn't think of anything conventional to say.

"H-how do you know my name?" I stammered.

He laughed a soft, enchanting laugh.

"Oh, I think everyone knows your name. The whole town's been waiting for you to arrive."

I grimaced. I knew it was something like that.

"No," I persisted stupidly. "I meant, why did you call me Bella?" He seemed confused. "Do you prefer Isabella?"

"No, I like Bella," I said. "But I think Charlie — I mean my dad — must call me Isabella behind my back — that's what everyone here seems to know me as," I tried to explain, feeling like an utter moron.

"Oh." He let it drop. I looked away awkwardly.

Thankfully, Mr. Banner started class at that moment. I tried to concentrate as he explained the lab we would be doing today. The slides in the box were out of order. Working as lab partners, we had to separate the slides of onion root tip cells into the phases of mitosis they represented and label them accordingly. We weren't supposed to use our books. In twenty minutes, he would be coming around to see who had it right.

"Get started," he commanded.

"Ladies first, partner?" Edward asked. I looked up to see him smiling a crooked smile so beautiful that I could only stare at him like an idiot.

"Or I could start, if you wish." The smile faded; he was obviously wondering if I was mentally competent.

"No," I said, flushing. "I'll go ahead." I was showing off, just a little. I'd already done this lab, and I knew

what I was looking for. It should be easy. I snapped the first slide into place under the microscope and adjusted it quickly to the 40X objective. I studied the slide briefly.

My assessment was confident. "Prophase."

"Do you mind if I look?" he asked as I began to remove the slide. His hand caught mine, to stop me, as he asked. His fingers were ice-cold, like he'd been holding them in a snowdrift before class. But that wasn't why I jerked my hand away so quickly. When he touched me, it stung my hand as if an electric current had passed through us.

"I'm sorry," he muttered, pulling his hand back immediately. However, he continued to reach for the microscope. I watched him, still staggered, as he examined the slide for an even shorter time than I had.

"Prophase," he agreed, writing it neatly in the first space on our worksheet. He swiftly switched out the first slide for the second, and then glanced at it cursorily.

"Anaphase," he murmured, writing it down as he spoke. I kept my voice indifferent. "May I?"

He smirked and pushed the microscope to me.

I looked through the eyepiece eagerly, only to be disappointed. Dang it, he was right.

"Slide three?" I held out my hand without looking at him. He handed it to me; it seemed like he was being careful not to touch my skin again.

I took the most fleeting look I could manage.

"Interphase." I passed him the microscope before he could ask for it. He took a swift peek, and then wrote it down. I would have written it while he looked, but his clear, elegant script intimidated me. I didn't want to spoil the page with my clumsy scrawl.

We were finished before anyone else was close. I could see Mike and his partner comparing two slides again and again, and another group had their book open under the table.

Which left me with nothing to do but try to not look at him...

unsuccessfully. I glanced up, and he was staring at me, that same inexplicable look of frustration in his eyes. Suddenly I identified that subtle difference in his face.

"Did you get contacts?" I blurted out unthinkingly. He seemed puzzled by my unexpected question. "No."

"Oh," I mumbled. "I thought there was something different about your eyes."

He shrugged, and looked away.

In fact, I was sure there was something different. I vividly remembered the flat black color of his eyes the last time he'd glared at me — the color was striking against the background of his pale skin and his auburn hair. Today, his eyes were a completely different color: a strange ocher, darker than butterscotch, but with the same golden tone. I didn't understand how that could be, unless he was lying

for some reason about the contacts. Or maybe Forks was making me crazy in the literal sense of the word.

I looked down. His hands were clenched into hard fists again. Mr. Banner came to our table then, to see why we weren't working. He looked over our shoulders to glance at the completed lab, and then stared more intently to check the answers.

"So, Edward, didn't you think Isabella should get a chance with the microscope?" Mr. Banner asked.

"Bella," Edward corrected automatically. "Actually, she identified three of the five."

Mr. Banner looked at me now; his expression was skeptical.

"Have you done this lab before?" he asked.

I smiled sheepishly. "Not with onion root."

"Whitefish blastula?"

"Yeah."

Mr. Banner nodded. "Were you in an advanced placement program in Phoenix?"

"Yes."

"Well," he said after a moment, "I guess it's good you two are lab partners." He mumbled something else as he walked away. After he left, I began doodling on my notebook again.

"It's too bad about the snow, isn't it?" Edward asked. I had the feeling that he was forcing himself to make

small talk with me. Paranoia swept over me again. It was like he had heard my conversation with Jessica at lunch and was trying to prove me wrong.

"Not really," I answered honestly, instead of pretending to be normal like everyone else. I was still trying to dislodge the stupid feeling of suspicion, and I couldn't concentrate.

"You don't like the cold." It wasn't a question.

"Or the wet."

"Forks must be a difficult place for you to live," he mused.

"You have no idea," I muttered darkly.

He looked fascinated by what I said, for some reason I couldn't imagine. His face was such a distraction that I tried not to look at it any more than courtesy absolutely demanded.

"Why did you come here, then?"

No one had asked me that — not straight out like he did, demanding.

"It's... complicated."

"I think I can keep up," he pressed.

I paused for a long moment, and then made the mistake of meeting his gaze. His dark gold eyes confused me, and I answered without thinking.

"My mother got remarried," I said.

"That doesn't sound so complex," he disagreed, but he was suddenly sympathetic. "When did that happen?"

"Last September." My voice sounded sad, even to me.

"And you don't like him," Edward surmised, his tone still kind.

"No, Phil is fine. Too young, maybe, but nice enough."

"Why didn't you stay with them?"

I couldn't fathom his interest, but he continued to stare at me with penetrating eyes, as if my dull life's story was somehow vitally important.

"Phil travels a lot. He plays ball for a living." I half-smiled.

"Have I heard of him?" he asked, smiling in response.

"Probably not. He doesn't play well. Strictly minor league. He moves around a lot."

"And your mother sent you here so that she could travel with him." He said it as an assumption again, not a question.

My chin raised a fraction. "No, she did not send me here. I sent myself." His eyebrows knit together. "I don't understand," he admitted, and he seemed unnecessarily frustrated by that fact.

I sighed. Why was I explaining this to him? He continued to stare at me with obvious curiosity.

"She stayed with me at first, but she missed him. It made her unhappy... so I decided it was time to spend

some quality time with Charlie." My voice was glum by the time I finished.

"But now you're unhappy," he pointed out.

"And?" I challenged.

"That doesn't seem fair." He shrugged, but his eyes were still intense. I laughed without humor. "Hasn't anyone ever told you? Life isn't fair."

"I believe I have heard that somewhere before," he agreed dryly.

"So that's all," I insisted, wondering why he was still staring at me that way.

His gaze became appraising. "You put on a good show," he said slowly.

"But I'd be willing to bet that you're suffering more than you let anyone see."

I grimaced at him, resisting the impulse to stick out my tongue like a five-year-old, and looked away.

"Am I wrong?"

I tried to ignore him.

"I didn't think so," he murmured smugly.

"Why does it matter to you?" I asked, irritated. I kept my eyes away, watching the teacher make his rounds.

"That's a very good question," he muttered, so quietly that I wondered if he was talking to himself. However, after a few seconds of silence, I decided that was the only answer I was going to get.

I sighed, scowling at the blackboard.

"Am I annoying you?" he asked. He sounded amused. I glanced at him without thinking... and told the truth again. "Not exactly. I'm more annoyed at myself. My face is so easy to read — my mother always calls me her open book." I frowned.

"On the contrary, I find you very difficult to read." Despite everything that I'd said and he'd guessed, he sounded like he meant it.

"You must be a good reader then," I replied.

"Usually." He smiled widely, flashing a set of perfect, ultrawhite teeth. Mr. Banner called the class to order then, and I turned with relief to listen. I was in disbelief that I'd just explained my dreary life to this bizarre, beautiful boy who may or may not despise me. He'd seemed engrossed in our conversation, but now I could see, from the corner of my eye, that he was leaning away from me again, his hands gripping the edge of the table with unmistakable tension.

I tried to appear attentive as Mr. Banner illustrated, with transparencies on the overhead projector, what I had seen without difficulty through the microscope. But my thoughts were unmanageable. When the bell finally rang, Edward rushed as swiftly and as gracefully from the room as he had last Monday. And, like last Monday, I stared after him in amazement.

Mike skipped quickly to my side and picked up my books for me. I imagined him with a wagging tail.

"That was awful," he groaned. "They all looked exactly the same. You're lucky you had Cullen for a partner."

"I didn't have any trouble with it," I said, stung by his assumption. I regretted the snub instantly. "I've done the lab before, though," I added before he could get his feelings hurt.

"Cullen seemed friendly enough today," he commented as we shrugged into our raincoats. He didn't seem pleased about it.

I tried to sound indifferent. "I wonder what was with him last Monday." I couldn't concentrate on Mike's chatter as we walked to Gym, and RE. didn't do much to hold my attention, either. Mike was on my team today. He chivalrously covered my position as well as his own, so my woolgathering was only interrupted when it was my turn to serve; my team ducked warily out of the way every time I was up.

The rain was just a mist as I walked to the parking lot, but I was happier when I was in the dry cab. I got the heater running, for once not caring about the mind-numbing roar of the engine. I unzipped my jacket, put the hood down, and fluffed my damp hair out so the heater could dry it on the way home.

I looked around me to make sure it was clear. That's when I noticed the still, white figure. Edward Cullen was leaning against the front door of the Volvo, three cars down from me, and staring intently in my direction. I swiftly looked away and threw the truck into reverse, almost hitting a rusty Toyota Corolla in my haste. Lucky for the Toyota, I stomped on the brake in time. It was just the sort of car that my truck

would make scrap metal of. I took a deep breath, still looking out the other side of my car, and cautiously pulled out again, with greater success. I stared straight ahead as I passed the Volvo, but from a peripheral peek, I would swear I saw him laughing.

# Chapter 3

## PHENOMENON

When I opened my eyes in the morning, something was different. It was the light. It was still the gray-green light of a cloudy day in the forest, but it was clearer somehow. I realized there was no fog veiling my window.

I jumped up to look outside, and then groaned in horror.

A fine layer of snow covered the yard, dusted the top of my truck, and whitened the road. But that wasn't the worst part. All the rain from yesterday had frozen solid — coating the needles on the trees in fantastic, gorgeous patterns, and making the driveway a deadly ice slick. I had enough trouble not falling down when the ground was dry; it might be safer for me to go back to bed now.

Charlie had left for work before I got downstairs. In a lot of ways, living with Charlie was like having my own place, and I found myself reveling in the aloneness instead of being lonely.

I threw down a quick bowl of cereal and some orange juice from the carton. I felt excited to go to school, and that scared me. I knew it wasn't the stimulating learning environment I was anticipating, or seeing my new set of friends. If I was being honest with myself, I knew I was eager to get to school because I would see Edward Cullen. And that was very, very stupid.

I should be avoiding him entirely after my brainless and embarrassing babbling yesterday. And I was suspicious of him; why should he lie about his eyes? I was still frightened of the hostility I sometimes felt emanating from him, and I was still tongue-tied whenever I pictured his perfect face. I was well aware that my league and his league were spheres that did not touch. So I shouldn't be at all anxious to see him today. It took every ounce of my concentration to make it down the icy brick driveway alive. I almost lost my balance when I finally got to the truck, but I managed to cling to the side mirror and save myself. Clearly, today was going to be nightmarish.

Driving to school, I distracted myself from my fear of falling and my unwanted speculations about Edward Cullen by thinking about Mike and Eric, and the obvious difference in how teenage boys responded to me here. I was sure I looked exactly the same as I had in Phoenix. Maybe it was just that the boys back home had watched me pass slowly through all the awkward phases of adolescence and still thought of me that way. Perhaps it was because I was a novelty here, where novelties were few and far between. Possibly my crippling clumsiness was seen as endearing rather than pathetic, casting me as a damsel in distress. Whatever the reason, Mike's puppy dog behavior and Eric's apparent rivalry with him were disconcerting. I wasn't sure if I didn't prefer being ignored. My truck seemed to have no problem with the black ice that covered the roads. I drove very slowly, though, not wanting to carve a path of destruction through Main Street.

When I got out of my truck at school, I saw why I'd had so little trouble. Something silver caught my eye, and I walked to the back of the truck — carefully holding the side for support — to examine my tires. There were thin chains crisscrossed in diamond shapes around them. Charlie had gotten up who knows how early to put snow chains on my truck. My throat suddenly felt tight. I wasn't used to being taken care of, and Charlie's unspoken concern caught me by surprise.

I was standing by the back corner of the truck, struggling to fight back the sudden wave of emotion the snow chains had brought on, when I heard an odd sound.

It was a high-pitched screech, and it was fast becoming painfully loud. I looked up, startled.

I saw several things simultaneously. Nothing was moving in slow motion, the way it does in the movies. Instead, the adrenaline rush seemed to make my brain work much faster, and I was able to absorb in clear detail several things at once.

Edward Cullen was standing four cars down from me, staring at me in horror. His face stood out from a sea of faces, all frozen in the same mask of shock. But of more immediate importance was the dark blue van that was skidding, tires locked and squealing against the brakes, spinning wildly across the ice of the parking lot. It was going to hit the back corner of my truck, and I was standing between them. I didn't even have time to close my eyes.

Just before I heard the shattering crunch of the van folding around the truck bed, something hit me, hard, but not from the direction I was expecting. My head cracked against the icy blacktop, and I felt something solid and cold pinning me to the ground. I was lying on the pavement behind the tan car I'd parked next to. But I didn't have a chance to notice anything else, because the van was still coming. It had curled gratingly around the end of the truck and, still spinning and sliding, was about to collide with me again.

A low oath made me aware that someone was with me, and the voice was impossible not to recognize. Two long, white hands shot out protectively in front of me, and the van shuddered to a stop a foot from my face, the large hands fitting providentially into a deep dent in the side of the van's body.

Then his hands moved so fast they blurred. One was suddenly gripping under the body of the van, and something was dragging me, swinging my legs around like a rag doll's, till they hit the tire of the tan car. A groaning metallic thud hurt my ears, and the van settled, glass popping, onto the asphalt — exactly where, a second ago, my legs had been. It was absolutely silent for one long second before the screaming began. In the abrupt bedlam, I could hear more than one person shouting my name. But more clearly than all the yelling, I could hear Edward Cullen's low, frantic voice in my ear.

"Bella? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." My voice sounded strange. I tried to sit up, and realized he was holding me against the side of his body in an iron grasp.

"Be careful," he warned as I struggled. "I think you hit your head pretty hard."

I became aware of a throbbing ache centered above my left ear.

"Ow," I said, surprised.

"That's what I thought." His voice, amazingly, sounded like he was suppressing laughter.

"How in the…" I trailed off, trying to clear my head, get my bearings.

"How did you get over here so fast?"

"I was standing right next to you, Bella," he said, his tone serious again.

I turned to sit up, and this time he let me, releasing his hold around my waist and sliding as far from me as he could in the limited space. I looked at his concerned, innocent expression and was disoriented again by the force of his gold-colored eyes. What was I asking him?

And then they found us, a crowd of people with tears streaming down their faces, shouting at each other, shouting at us.

"Don't move," someone instructed.

"Get Tyler out of the van!" someone else shouted. There was a flurry of activity around us. I tried to get

up, but Edward's cold hand pushed my shoulder down.

"Just stay put for now."

"But it's cold," I complained. It surprised me when he chuckled under his breath. There was an edge to the sound.

"You were over there," I suddenly remembered, and his chuckle stopped short. "You were by your car."

His expression turned hard. "No, I wasn't."

"I saw you." All around us was chaos. I could hear the gruffer voices of adults arriving on the scene. But I obstinately held on to our argument; I was right, and he was going to admit it.

"Bella, I was standing with you, and I pulled you out of the way." He unleashed the full, devastating power of his eyes on me, as if trying to communicate something crucial.

"No." I set my jaw.

The gold in his eyes blazed. "Please, Bella."

"Why?" I demanded.

"Trust me," he pleaded, his soft voice overwhelming. I could hear the sirens now. "Will you promise to explain everything to me later?"

"Fine," he snapped, abruptly exasperated.

"Fine," I repeated angrily.

It took six EMTs and two teachers — Mr. Varner and Coach Clapp — to shift the van far enough away from us to bring the stretchers in. Edward vehemently refused his, and I tried to do the same, but the traitor told them I'd hit my head and probably had a concussion. I almost died of humiliation when they put on the neck brace. It looked like the entire school was there, watching soberly as they loaded me in the back of the ambulance. Edward got to ride in the front. It was maddening. To make matters worse, Chief Swan arrived before they could get me safely away.

"Bella!" he yelled in panic when he recognized me on the stretcher.

"I'm completely fine, Char — Dad," I sighed. "There's nothing wrong with me."

He turned to the closest EMT for a second opinion. I tuned him out to consider the jumble of inexplicable images churning chaotically in my head. When they'd lifted me away from the car, I had seen the deep dent in the tan car's bumper — a very distinct dent that fit the contours of Edward's shoulders... as if he had braced himself against the car with enough force to damage the metal frame...

And then there was his family, looking on from the distance, with expressions that ranged from disapproval to fury but held no hint of concern for their brother's safety.

I tried to think of a logical solution that could explain what I had just seen — a solution that excluded the assumption that I was insane. Naturally, the

ambulance got a police escort to the county hospital. I felt ridiculous the whole time they were unloading me. What made it worse was that Edward simply glided through the hospital doors under his own power. I ground my teeth together.

They put me in the emergency room, a long room with a line of beds separated by pastel-patterned curtains. A nurse put a pressure cuff on my arm and a thermometer under my tongue. Since no one bothered pulling the curtain around to give me some privacy, I decided I wasn't obligated to wear the stupid-looking neck brace anymore. When the nurse walked away, I quickly unfastened the Velcro and threw it under the bed. There was another flurry of hospital personnel, another stretcher brought to the bed next to me. I recognized Tyler Crowley from my Government class beneath the bloodstained bandages wrapped tightly around his head. Tyler looked a hundred times worse than I felt. But he was staring anxiously at me.

"Bella, I'm so sorry!"

"I'm fine, Tyler — you look awful, are you all right?" As we spoke, nurses began unwinding his soiled bandages, exposing a myriad of shallow slices all over his forehead and left cheek.

He ignored me. "I thought I was going to kill you! I was going too fast, and I hit the ice wrong…" He winced as one nurse started dabbing at his face.

"Don't worry about it; you missed me."

"How did you get out of the way so fast? You were there, and then you were gone…"

"Umm… Edward pulled me out of the way."

He looked confused. "Who?"

"Edward Cullen — he was standing next to me." I'd always been a terrible liar; I didn't sound convincing at all.

"Cullen? I didn't see him… wow, it was all so fast, I guess. Is he okay?"

"I think so. He's here somewhere, but they didn't make him use a stretcher."

I knew I wasn't crazy. What had happened? There was no way to explain away what I'd seen.

They wheeled me away then, to X-ray my head. I told them there was nothing wrong, and I was right. Not even a concussion. I asked if I could leave, but the nurse said I had to talk to a doctor first. So I was trapped in the ER, waiting, harassed by Tyler's constant apologies and promises to make it up to me. No matter how many times I tried to convince him I was fine, he continued to torment himself. Finally, I closed my eyes and ignored him. He kept up a remorseful mumbling.

"Is she sleeping?" a musical voice asked. My eyes flew open. Edward was standing at the foot of my bed, smirking. I glared at him. It wasn't easy — it would have been more natural to ogle.

"Hey, Edward, I'm really sorry —" Tyler began.

Edward lifted a hand to stop him.

"No blood, no foul," he said, flashing his brilliant teeth. He moved to sit on the edge of Tyler's bed, facing me. He smirked again.

"So, what's the verdict?" he asked me.

"There's nothing wrong with me at all, but they won't let me go," I complained. "How come you aren't strapped to a gurney like the rest of us?"

"It's all about who you know," he answered. "But don't worry, I came to spring you."

Then a doctor walked around the corner, and my mouth fell open. He was young, he was blond… and he was handsomer than any movie star I'd ever seen. He was pale, though, and tired-looking, with circles under his eyes. From Charlie's description, this had to be Edward's father.

"So, Miss Swan," Dr. Cullen said in a remarkably appealing voice, "how are you feeling?"

"I'm fine," I said, for the last time, I hoped. He walked to the lightboard on the wall over my head, and turned it on.

"Your X-rays look good," he said. "Does your head hurt? Edward said you hit it pretty hard."

"It's fine," I repeated with a sigh, throwing a quick scowl toward Edward. The doctor's cool fingers probed lightly along my skull. He noticed when I winced.

"Tender?" he asked.

"Not really." I'd had worse.

I heard a chuckle, and looked over to see Edward's patronizing smile. My eyes narrowed.

"Well, your father is in the waiting room — you can go home with him now. But come back if you feel dizzy or have trouble with your eyesight at all."

"Can't I go back to school?" I asked, imagining Charlie trying to be attentive.

"Maybe you should take it easy today."

I glanced at Edward. "Does he get to go to school?"

"Someone has to spread the good news that we survived," Edward said smugly.

"Actually," Dr. Cullen corrected, "most of the school seems to be in the waiting room."

"Oh no," I moaned, covering my face with my hands. Dr. Cullen raised his eyebrows. "Do you want to stay?"

"No, no!" I insisted, throwing my legs over the side of the bed and hopping down quickly. Too quickly — I staggered, and Dr. Cullen caught me. He looked concerned.

"I'm fine," I assured him again. No need to tell him my balance problems had nothing to do with hitting my head.

"Take some Tylenol for the pain," he suggested as he steadied me.

"It doesn't hurt that bad," I insisted.

"It sounds like you were extremely lucky," Dr. Cullen said, smiling as he signed my chart with a flourish.

"Lucky Edward happened to be standing next to me," I amended with a hard glance at the subject of my statement.

"Oh, well, yes," Dr. Cullen agreed, suddenly occupied with the papers in front of him. Then he looked away, at Tyler, and walked to the next bed. My intuition flickered; the doctor was in on it.

"I'm afraid that you'll have to stay with us just a little bit longer," he said to Tyler, and began checking his cuts.

As soon as the doctor's back was turned, I moved to Edward's side.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" I hissed under my breath. He took a step back from me, his jaw suddenly clenched.

"Your father is waiting for you," he said through his teeth. I glanced at Dr. Cullen and Tyler.

"I'd like to speak with you alone, if you don't mind," I pressed. He glared, and then turned his back and strode down the long room. I nearly had to run to keep up. As soon as we turned the corner into a short hallway, he spun around to face me.

"What do you want?" he asked, sounding annoyed. His eyes were cold. His unfriendliness intimidated me. My words came out with less severity than I'd

intended. "You owe me an explanation," I reminded him.

"I saved your life — I don't owe you anything." I flinched back from the resentment in his voice. "You promised."

"Bella, you hit your head, you don't know what you're talking about." His tone was cutting.

My temper flared now, and I glared defiantly at him. "There's nothing wrong with my head."

He glared back. "What do you want from me, Bella?"

"I want to know the truth," I said. "I want to know why I'm lying for you."

"What do you think happened?" he snapped.

It came out in a rush.

"All I know is that you weren't anywhere near me — Tyler didn't see you, either, so don't tell me I hit my head too hard. That van was going to crush us both — and it didn't, and your hands left dents in the side of it — and you left a dent in the other car, and you're not hurt at all —

and the van should have smashed my legs, but you were holding it up..." I could hear how crazy it sounded, and I couldn't continue. I was so mad I could feel the tears coming; I tried to force them back by grinding my teeth together.

He was staring at me incredulously. But his face was tense, defensive.

"You think I lifted a van off you?" His tone questioned my sanity, but it only made me more suspicious. It was like a perfectly delivered line by a skilled actor.

I merely nodded once, jaw tight.

"Nobody will believe that, you know." His voice held an edge of derision now.

"I'm not going to tell anybody." I said each word slowly, carefully controlling my anger.

Surprise flitted across his face. "Then why does it matter?"

"It matters to me," I insisted. "I don't like to lie — so there'd better be a good reason why I'm doing it."

"Can't you just thank me and get over it?"

"Thank you." I waited, fuming and expectant.

"You're not going to let it go, are you?"

"No."

"In that case… I hope you enjoy disappointment." We scowled at each other in silence. I was the first to speak, trying to keep myself focused. I was in danger of being distracted by his livid, glorious face. It was like trying to stare down a destroying angel.

"Why did you even bother?" I asked frigidly.

He paused, and for a brief moment his stunning face was unexpectedly vulnerable.

"I don't know," he whispered.

And then he turned his back on me and walked away.

I was so angry, it took me a few minutes until I could move. When I could walk, I made my way slowly to the exit at the end of the hallway. The waiting room was more unpleasant than I'd feared. It seemed like every face I knew in Forks was there, staring at me. Charlie rushed to my side; I put up my hands.

"There's nothing wrong with me," I assured him sullenly. I was still aggravated, not in the mood for chitchat.

"What did the doctor say?"

"Dr. Cullen saw me, and he said I was fine and I could go home." I sighed. Mike and Jessica and Eric were all there, beginning to converge on us. "Let's go," I urged.

Charlie put one arm behind my back, not quite touching me, and led me to the glass doors of the exit. I waved sheepishly at my friends, hoping to convey that they didn't need to worry anymore. It was a huge relief— the first time I'd ever felt that way — to get into the cruiser. We drove in silence. I was so wrapped up in my thoughts that I barely knew Charlie was there. I was positive that Edward's defensive behavior in the hall was a confirmation of the bizarre things I still could hardly believe I'd witnessed.

When we got to the house, Charlie finally spoke.

"Um... you'll need to call Renée." He hung his head, guilty. I was appalled. "You told Mom!"

"Sorry."

I slammed the cruiser's door a little harder than necessary on my way out. My mom was in hysterics, of course. I had to tell her I felt fine at least thirty times before she would calm down. She begged me to come home

— forgetting the fact that home was empty at the moment — but her pleas were easier to resist than I would have thought. I was consumed by the mystery Edward presented. And more than a little obsessed by Edward himself. Stupid, stupid, stupid. I wasn't as eager to escape Forks as I should be, as any normal, sane person would be.

I decided I might as well go to bed early that night. Charlie continued to watch me anxiously, and it was getting on my nerves. I stopped on my way to grab three Tylenol from the bathroom. They did help, and, as the pain eased, I drifted to sleep.

That was the first night I dreamed of Edward Cullen.

# Chapter 4

## INVITATIONS

In my dream it was very dark, and what dim light there was seemed to be radiating from Edward's skin. I couldn't see his face, just his back as he walked away from me, leaving me in the blackness. No matter how fast I ran, I couldn't catch up to him; no matter how loud I called, he never turned. Troubled, I woke in the middle of the night and couldn't sleep again for what seemed like a very long time. After that, he was in my dreams nearly every night, but always on the periphery, never within reach.

The month that followed the accident was uneasy, tense, and, at first, embarrassing.

To my dismay, I found myself the center of attention for the rest of that week. Tyler Crowley was impossible, following me around, obsessed with making amends to me somehow. I tried to convince him what I wanted more than anything else was for him to forget all about it — especially since nothing had actually happened to me — but he remained insistent. He followed me between classes and sat at our now-crowded lunch table. Mike and Eric were even less friendly toward him than they were to each other, which made me worry that I'd gained another unwelcome fan. No one seemed concerned about Edward, though I explained over and over that he was the hero — how he had pulled me out of the way and had nearly been crushed, too. I tried to be convincing. Jessica, Mike, Eric, and everyone else always

commented that they hadn't even seen him there till the van was pulled away.

I wondered to myself why no one else had seen him standing so far away, before he was suddenly, impossibly saving my life. With chagrin, I realized the probable cause — no one else was as aware of Edward as I always was. No one else watched him the way I did. How pitiful. Edward was never surrounded by crowds of curious bystanders eager for his firsthand account. People avoided him as usual. The Cullens and the Hales sat at the same table as always, not eating, talking only among themselves. None of them, especially Edward, glanced my way anymore. When he sat next to me in class, as far from me as the table would allow, he seemed totally unaware of my presence. Only now and then, when his fists would suddenly ball up — skin stretched even whiter over the bones — did I wonder if he wasn't quite as oblivious as he appeared. He wished he hadn't pulled me from the path of Tyler's van — there was no other conclusion I could come to.

I wanted very much to talk to him, and the day after the accident I tried. The last time I'd seen him, outside the ER, we'd both been so furious. I still was angry that he wouldn't trust me with the truth, even though I was keeping my part of the bargain flawlessly. But he had in fact saved my life, no matter how he'd done it. And, overnight, the heat of my anger faded into awed gratitude.

He was already seated when I got to Biology, looking straight ahead. I sat down, expecting him to turn

toward me. He showed no sign that he realized I was there.

"Hello, Edward," I said pleasantly, to show him I was going to behave myself.

He turned his head a fraction toward me without meeting my gaze, nodded once, and then looked the other way.

And that was the last contact I'd had with him, though he was there, a foot away from me, every day. I watched him sometimes, unable to stop myself—from a distance, though, in the cafeteria or parking lot. I watched as his golden eyes grew perceptibly darker day by day. But in class I gave no more notice that he existed than he showed toward me. I was miserable. And the dreams continued.

Despite my outright lies, the tenor of my e-mails alerted Renée to my depression, and she called a few times, worried. I tried to convince her it was just the weather that had me down.

Mike, at least, was pleased by the obvious coolness between me and my lab partner. I could see he'd been worried that Edward's daring rescue might have impressed me, and he was relieved that it seemed to have the opposite effect. He grew more confident, sitting on the edge of my table to talk before Biology class started, ignoring Edward as completely as he ignored us.

The snow washed away for good after that one dangerously icy day. Mike was disappointed he'd never gotten to stage his snowball fight, but pleased

that the beach trip would soon be possible. The rain continued heavily, though, and the weeks passed.

Jessica made me aware of another event looming on the horizon — she called the first Tuesday of March to ask my permission to invite Mike to the girls' choice spring dance in two weeks.

"Are you sure you don't mind... you weren't planning to ask him?" she persisted when I told her I didn't mind in the least.

"No, Jess, I'm not going," I assured her. Dancing was glaringly outside my range of abilities.

"It will be really fun." Her attempt to convince me was halfhearted. I suspected that Jessica enjoyed my inexplicable popularity more than my actual company.

"You have fun with Mike," I encouraged.

The next day, I was surprised that Jessica wasn't her usual gushing self in Trig and Spanish. She was silent as she walked by my side between classes, and I was afraid to ask her why. If Mike had turned her down, I was the last person she would want to tell.

My fears were strengthened during lunch when Jessica sat as far from Mike as possible, chatting animatedly with Eric. Mike was unusually quiet. Mike was still quiet as he walked me to class, the uncomfortable look on his face a bad sign. But he didn't broach the subject until I was in my seat and he was perched on my desk. As always, I was electrically aware of Edward sitting close enough to

touch, as distant as if he were merely an invention of my imagination.

"So," Mike said, looking at the floor, "Jessica asked me to the spring dance."

"That's great." I made my voice bright and enthusiastic. "You'll have a lot of fun with Jessica."

"Well..." He floundered as he examined my smile, clearly not happy with my response. "I told her I had to think about it."

"Why would you do that?" I let disapproval color my tone, though I was relieved he hadn't given her an absolute no.

His face was bright red as he looked down again. Pity shook my resolve.

"I was wondering if... well, if you might be planning to ask me." I paused for a moment, hating the wave of guilt that swept through me. But I saw, from the corner of my eye, Edward's head tilt reflexively in my direction.

"Mike, I think you should tell her yes," I said.

"Did you already ask someone?" Did Edward notice how Mike's eyes flickered in his direction?

"No," I assured him. "I'm not going to the dance at all."

"Why not?" Mike demanded.

I didn't want to get into the safety hazards that dancing presented, so I quickly made new plans.

"I'm going to Seattle that Saturday," I explained. I needed to get out of town anyway — it was suddenly the perfect time to go.

"Can't you go some other weekend?"

"Sorry, no," I said. "So you shouldn't make Jess wait any longer — it's rude."

"Yeah, you're right," he mumbled, and turned, dejected, to walk back to his seat. I closed my eyes and pressed my fingers to my temples, trying to push the guilt and sympathy out of my head. Mr. Banner began talking. I sighed and opened my eyes.

And Edward was staring at me curiously, that same, familiar edge of frustration even more distinct now in his black eyes.

I stared back, surprised, expecting him to look quickly away. But instead he continued to gaze with probing intensity into my eyes. There was no question of me looking away. My hands started to shake.

"Mr. Cullen?" the teacher called, seeking the answer to a question that I hadn't heard.

"The Krebs Cycle," Edward answered, seeming reluctant as he turned to look at Mr. Banner.

I looked down at my book as soon as his eyes released me, trying to find my place. Cowardly as ever, I shifted my hair over my right shoulder to hide my face. I couldn't believe the rush of emotion pulsing through me —

just because he'd happened to look at me for the first time in a half-dozen weeks. I couldn't allow him to have this level of influence over me. It was pathetic. More than pathetic, it was unhealthy. I tried very hard not to be aware of him for the rest of the hour, and, since that was impossible, at least not to let him know that I was aware of him. When the bell rang at last, I turned my back to him to gather my things, expecting him to leave immediately as usual.

"Bella?" His voice shouldn't have been so familiar to me, as if I'd known the sound of it all my life rather than for just a few short weeks. I turned slowly, unwillingly. I didn't want to feel what I knew I would feel when I looked at his too-perfect face. My expression was wary when I finally turned to him; his expression was unreadable. He didn't say anything.

"What? Are you speaking to me again?" I finally asked, an unintentional note of petulance in my voice.

His lips twitched, fighting a smile. "No, not really," he admitted. I closed my eyes and inhaled slowly through my nose, aware that I was gritting my teeth. He waited.

"Then what do you want, Edward?" I asked, keeping my eyes closed; it was easier to talk to him coherently that way.

"I'm sorry." He sounded sincere. "I'm being very rude, I know. But it's better this way, really."

I opened my eyes. His face was very serious.

"I don't know what you mean," I said, my voice guarded.

"It's better if we're not friends," he explained. "Trust me." My eyes narrowed. I'd heard that before.

"It's too bad you didn't figure that out earlier," I hissed through my teeth. "You could have saved yourself all this regret."

"Regret?" The word, and my tone, obviously caught him off guard. "Regret for what?"

"For not just letting that stupid van squish me." He was astonished. He stared at me in disbelief.

When he finally spoke, he almost sounded mad. "You think I regret saving your life?"

"I know you do," I snapped.

"You don't know anything." He was definitely mad. I turned my head sharply away from him, clenching my jaw against all the wild accusations I wanted to hurl at him. I gathered my books together, then stood and walked to the door. I meant to sweep dramatically out of the room, but of course I caught the toe of my boot on the door jamb and dropped my books. I stood there for a moment, thinking about leaving them. Then I sighed and bent to pick them up. He was there; he'd already stacked them into a pile. He handed them to me, his face hard.

"Thank you," I said icily.

His eyes narrowed.

"You're welcome," he retorted.

I straightened up swiftly, turned away from him again, and stalked off to Gym without looking back.

Gym was brutal. We'd moved on to basketball. My team never passed me the ball, so that was good, but I fell down a lot. Sometimes I took people with me. Today I was worse than usual because my head was so filled with Edward. I tried to concentrate on my feet, but he kept creeping back into my thoughts just when I really needed my balance.

It was a relief, as always, to leave. I almost ran to the truck; there were just so many people I wanted to avoid. The truck had suffered only minimal damage in the accident. I'd had to replace the taillights, and if I'd had a real paint job, I would have touched that up. Tyler's parents had to sell their van for parts.

I almost had a stroke when I rounded the corner and saw a tall, dark figure leaning against the side of my truck. Then I realized it was just Eric. I started walking again.

"Hey, Eric," I called.

"Hi, Bella."

"What's up?" I said as I was unlocking the door. I wasn't paying attention to the uncomfortable edge in his voice, so his next words took me by surprise.

"Uh, I was just wondering... if you would go to the spring dance with me?" His voice broke on the last word.

"I thought it was girls' choice," I said, too startled to be diplomatic.

"Well, yeah," he admitted, shamefaced.

I recovered my composure and tried to make my smile warm. "Thank you for asking me, but I'm going to be in Seattle that day."

"Oh," he said. "Well, maybe next time."

"Sure," I agreed, and then bit my lip. I wouldn't want him to take that too literally.

He slouched off, back toward the school. I heard a low chuckle. Edward was walking past the front of my truck, looking straight forward, his lips pressed together. I yanked the door open and jumped inside, slamming it loudly behind me. I revved the engine deafeningly and reversed out into the aisle. Edward was in his car already, two spaces down, sliding out smoothly in front of me, cutting me off. He stopped there — to wait for his family; I could see the four of them walking this way, but still by the cafeteria. I considered taking out the rear of his shiny Volvo, but there were too many witnesses. I looked in my rearview mirror. A line was beginning to form. Directly behind me, Tyler Crowley was in his recently acquired used Sentra, waving. I was too aggravated to acknowledge him.

While I was sitting there, looking everywhere but at the car in front of me, I heard a knock on my passenger side window. I looked over; it was Tyler. I glanced back in my rearview mirror, confused. His car was still running, the door left open. I leaned across

the cab to crank the window down. It was stiff. I got it halfway down, then gave up.

"I'm sorry, Tyler, I'm stuck behind Cullen." I was annoyed — obviously the holdup wasn't my fault.

"Oh, I know — I just wanted to ask you something while we're trapped here." He grinned.

This could not be happening.

"Will you ask me to the spring dance?" he continued.

"I'm not going to be in town, Tyler." My voice sounded a little sharp. I had to remember it wasn't his fault that Mike and Eric had already used up my quota of patience for the day.

"Yeah, Mike said that," he admitted.

"Then why —"

He shrugged. "I was hoping you were just letting him down easy." Okay, it was completely his fault.

"Sorry, Tyler," I said, working to hide my irritation. "I really am going out of town."

"That's cool. We still have prom."

And before I could respond, he was walking back to his car. I could feel the shock on my face. I looked forward to see Alice, Rosalie, Emmett, and Jasper all sliding into the Volvo. In his rearview mirror, Edward's eyes were on me. He was unquestionably shaking with laughter, as if he'd heard every word Tyler had said. My foot itched toward the gas pedal...

one little bump wouldn't hurt any of them, just that glossy silver paint job. I revved the engine.

But they were all in, and Edward was speeding away. I drove home slowly, carefully, muttering to myself the whole way.

When I got home, I decided to make chicken enchiladas for dinner. It was a long process, and it would keep me busy. While I was simmering the onions and chilies, the phone rang. I was almost afraid to answer it, but it might be Charlie or my mom.

It was Jessica, and she was jubilant; Mike had caught her after school to accept her invitation. I celebrated with her briefly while I stirred. She had to go, she wanted to call Angela and Lauren to tell them. I suggested — with casual innocence — that maybe Angela, the shy girl who had Biology with me, could ask Eric. And Lauren, a standoffish girl who had always ignored me at the lunch table, could ask Tyler; I'd heard he was still available. Jess thought that was a great idea. Now that she was sure of Mike, she actually sounded sincere when she said she wished I would go to the dance. I gave her my Seattle excuse.

After I hung up, I tried to concentrate on dinner — dicing the chicken especially; I didn't want to take another trip to the emergency room. But my head was spinning, trying to analyze every word Edward had spoken today. What did he mean, it was better if we weren't friends?

My stomach twisted as I realized what he must have meant. He must see how absorbed I was by him; he

must not want to lead me on… so we couldn't even be friends… because he wasn't interested in me at all. Of course he wasn't interested in me, I thought angrily, my eyes stinging — a delayed reaction to the onions. I wasn't interesting. And he was. Interesting… and brilliant… and mysterious… and perfect… and beautiful…

and possibly able to lift full-sized vans with one hand.

Well, that was fine. I could leave him alone. I would leave him alone. I would get through my self-imposed sentence here in purgatory, and then hopefully some school in the Southwest, or possibly Hawaii, would offer me a scholarship. I focused my thoughts on sunny beaches and palm trees as I finished the enchiladas and put them in the oven.

Charlie seemed suspicious when he came home and smelled the green peppers. I couldn't blame him — the closest edible Mexican food was probably in southern California. But he was a cop, even if just a small-town cop, so he was brave enough to take the first bite. He seemed to like it. It was fun to watch as he slowly began trusting me in the kitchen.

"Dad?" I asked when he was almost done.

"Yeah, Bella?"

"Um, I just wanted to let you know that I'm going to Seattle for the day a week from Saturday… if that's okay?" I didn't want to ask permission —

it set a bad precedent — but I felt rude, so I tacked it on at the end.

"Why?" He sounded surprised, as if he were unable to imagine something that Forks couldn't offer.

"Well, I wanted to get few books — the library here is pretty limited — and maybe look at some clothes." I had more money than I was used to having, since, thanks to Charlie, I hadn't had to pay for a car. Not that the truck didn't cost me quite a bit in the gas department.

"That truck probably doesn't get very good gas mileage," he said, echoing my thoughts.

"I know, I'll stop in Montesano and Olympia — and Tacoma if I have to."

"Are you going all by yourself?" he asked, and I couldn't tell if he was suspicious I had a secret boyfriend or just worried about car trouble.

"Yes."

"Seattle is a big city — you could get lost," he fretted.

"Dad, Phoenix is five times the size of Seattle — and I can read a map, don't worry about it."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

I tried to be crafty as I hid my horror.

"That's all right, Dad, I'll probably just be in dressing rooms all day — very boring."

"Oh, okay." The thought of sitting in women's clothing stores for any period of time immediately put him off.

"Thanks." I smiled at him.

"Will you be back in time for the dance?"

Grrr. Only in a town this small would a father know when the high school dances were.

"No — I don't dance, Dad." He, of all people, should understand that — I didn't get my balance problems from my mother.

He did understand. "Oh, that's right," he realized. The next morning, when I pulled into the parking lot, I deliberately parked as far as possible from the silver Volvo. I didn't want to put myself in the path of too much temptation and end up owing him a new car. Getting out of the cab, I fumbled with my key and it fell into a puddle at my feet. As I bent to get it, a white hand flashed out and grabbed it before I could. I jerked upright. Edward Cullen was right next to me, leaning casually against my truck.

"How do you do that?" I asked in amazed irritation.

"Do what?" He held my key out as he spoke. As I reached for it, he dropped it into my palm.

"Appear out of thin air."

"Bella, it's not my fault if you are exceptionally unobservant." His voice was quiet as usual — velvet, muted.

I scowled at his perfect face. His eyes were light again today, a deep, golden honey color. Then I had to look down, to reassemble my now-tangled thoughts.

"Why the traffic jam last night?" I demanded, still looking away. "I thought you were supposed to be pretending I don't exist, not irritating me to death."

"That was for Tyler's sake, not mine. I had to give him his chance." He snickered.

"You…" I gasped. I couldn't think of a bad enough word. It felt like the heat of my anger should physically burn him, but he only seemed more amused.

"And I'm not pretending you don't exist," he continued.

"So you are trying to irritate me to death? Since Tyler's van didn't do the job?"

Anger flashed in his tawny eyes. His lips pressed into a hard line, all signs of humor gone.

"Bella, you are utterly absurd," he said, his low voice cold. My palms tingled — I wanted so badly to hit something. I was surprised at myself. I was usually a nonviolent person. I turned my back and started to walk away.

"Wait," he called. I kept walking, sloshing angrily through the rain. But he was next to me, easily keeping pace.

"I'm sorry, that was rude," he said as we walked. I ignored him. "I'm not saying it isn't true," he continued, "but it was rude to say it, anyway."

"Why won't you leave me alone?" I grumbled.

"I wanted to ask you something, but you sidetracked me," he chuckled. He seemed to have recovered his good humor.

"Do you have a multiple personality disorder?" I asked severely.

"You're doing it again."

I sighed. "Fine then. What do you want to ask?"

"I was wondering if, a week from Saturday — you know, the day of the spring dance —"

"Are you trying to be funny?" I interrupted him, wheeling toward him. My face got drenched as I looked up at his expression.

His eyes were wickedly amused. "Will you please allow me to finish?" I bit my lip and clasped my hands together, interlocking my fingers, so I couldn't do anything rash.

"I heard you say you were going to Seattle that day, and I was wondering if you wanted a ride."

That was unexpected.

"What?" I wasn't sure what he was getting at.

"Do you want a ride to Seattle?"

"With who?" I asked, mystified.

"Myself, obviously." He enunciated every syllable, as if he were talking to someone mentally handicapped.

I was still stunned. "Why?"

"Well, I was planning to go to Seattle in the next few weeks, and, to be honest, I'm not sure if your truck can make it."

"My truck works just fine, thank you very much for your concern." I started to walk again, but I was too surprised to maintain the same level of anger.

"But can your truck make it there on one tank of gas?" He matched my pace again.

"I don't see how that is any of your business." Stupid, shiny Volvo owner.

"The wasting of finite resources is everyone's business."

"Honestly, Edward." I felt a thrill go through me as I said his name, and I hated it. "I can't keep up with you. I thought you didn't want to be my friend."

"I said it would be better if we weren't friends, not that I didn't want to be."

"Oh, thanks, now that's all cleared up." Heavy sarcasm. I realized I had stopped walking again. We were under the shelter of the cafeteria roof now, so I could more easily look at his face. Which certainly didn't help my clarity of thought.

"It would be more... prudent for you not to be my friend," he explained.

"But I'm tired of trying to stay away from you, Bella." His eyes were gloriously intense as he uttered that last sentence, his voice smoldering. I couldn't remember how to breathe.

"Will you go with me to Seattle?" he asked, still intense. I couldn't speak yet, so I just nodded.

He smiled briefly, and then his face became serious.

"You really should stay away from me," he warned. "I'll see you in class." He turned abruptly and walked back the way we'd come.

# Chapter 5

## BLOOD TYPE

I made my way to English in a daze. I didn't even realize when I first walked in that class had already started.

"Thank you for joining us, Miss Swan," Mr. Mason said in a disparaging tone.

I flushed and hurried to my seat.

It wasn't till class ended that I realized Mike wasn't sitting in his usual seat next to me. I felt a twinge of guilt. But he and Eric both met me at the door as usual, so I figured I wasn't totally unforgiven. Mike seemed to become more himself as we walked, gaining enthusiasm as he talked about the weather report for this weekend. The rain was supposed to take a minor break, and so maybe his beach trip would be possible. I tried to sound eager, to make up for disappointing him yesterday. It was hard; rain or no rain, it would still only be in the high forties, if we were lucky.

The rest of the morning passed in a blur. It was difficult to believe that I hadn't just imagined what Edward had said, and the way his eyes had looked. Maybe it was just a very convincing dream that I'd confused with reality. That seemed more probable than that I really appealed to him on any level.

So I was impatient and frightened as Jessica and I entered the cafeteria. I wanted to see his face, to see if

he'd gone back to the cold, indifferent person I'd known for the last several weeks. Or if, by some miracle, I'd really heard what I thought I'd heard this morning. Jessica babbled on and on about her dance plans — Lauren and Angela had asked the other boys and they were all going together — completely unaware of my inattention.

Disappointment flooded through me as my eyes unerringly focused on his table. The other four were there, but he was absent. Had he gone home? I followed the still-babbling Jessica through the line, crushed. I'd lost my appetite — I bought nothing but a bottle of lemonade. I just wanted to go sit down and sulk.

"Edward Cullen is staring at you again," Jessica said, finally breaking through my abstraction with his name. "I wonder why he's sitting alone today."

My head snapped up. I followed her gaze to see Edward, smiling crookedly, staring at me from an empty table across the cafeteria from where he usually sat. Once he'd caught my eye, he raised one hand and motioned with his index finger for me to join him. As I stared in disbelief, he winked.

"Does he mean you?" Jessica asked with insulting astonishment in her voice.

"Maybe he needs help with his Biology homework," I muttered for her benefit. "Um, I'd better go see what he wants." I could feel her staring after me as I walked away.

When I reached his table, I stood behind the chair across from him, unsure.

"Why don't you sit with me today?" he asked, smiling. I sat down automatically, watching him with caution. He was still smiling. It was hard to believe that someone so beautiful could be real. I was afraid that he might disappear in a sudden puff of smoke, and I would wake up.

He seemed to be waiting for me to say something.

"This is different," I finally managed.

"Well..." He paused, and then the rest of the words followed in a rush. "I decided as long as I was going to hell, I might as well do it thoroughly." I waited for him to say something that made sense. The seconds ticked by.

"You know I don't have any idea what you mean," I eventually pointed out.

"I know." He smiled again, and then he changed the subject. "I think your friends are angry with me for stealing you."

"They'll survive." I could feel their stares boring into my back.

"I may not give you back, though," he said with a wicked glint in his eyes.

I gulped.

He laughed. "You look worried."

"No," I said, but, ridiculously, my voice broke. "Surprised, actually...

what brought all this on?"

"I told you — I got tired of trying to stay away from you. So I'm giving up." He was still smiling, but his ocher eyes were serious.

"Giving up?" I repeated in confusion.

"Yes — giving up trying to be good. I'm just going to do what I want now, and let the chips fall where they may." His smile faded as he explained, and a hard edge crept into his voice.

"You lost me again."

The breathtaking crooked smile reappeared.

"I always say too much when I'm talking to you — that's one of the problems."

"Don't worry — I don't understand any of it," I said wryly.

"I'm counting on that."

"So, in plain English, are we friends now?"

"Friends..." he mused, dubious.

"Or not," I muttered.

He grinned. "Well, we can try, I suppose. But I'm warning you now that I'm not a good friend for you." Behind his smile, the warning was real.

"You say that a lot," I noted, trying to ignore the sudden trembling in my stomach and keep my voice even.

"Yes, because you're not listening to me. I'm still waiting for you to believe it. If you're smart, you'll avoid me."

"I think you've made your opinion on the subject of my intellect clear, too." My eyes narrowed.

He smiled apologetically.

"So, as long as I'm being... not smart, we'll try to be friends?" I struggled to sum up the confusing exchange.

"That sounds about right."

I looked down at my hands wrapped around the lemonade bottle, not sure what to do now.

"What are you thinking?" he asked curiously.

I looked up into his deep gold eyes, became befuddled, and, as usual, blurted out the truth.

"I'm trying to figure out what you are."

His jaw tightened, but he kept his smile in place with some effort.

"Are you having any luck with that?" he asked in an offhand tone.

"Not too much," I admitted.

He chuckled. "What are your theories?"

I blushed. I had been vacillating during the last month between Bruce Wayne and Peter Parker. There was no way I was going to own up to that.

"Won't you tell me?" he asked, tilting his head to one side with a shockingly tempting smile.

I shook my head. "Too embarrassing."

"That's really frustrating, you know," he complained.

"No," I disagreed quickly, my eyes narrowing, "I can't imagine why that would be frustrating at all — just because someone refuses to tell you what they're thinking, even if all the while they're making cryptic little remarks specifically designed to keep you up at night wondering what they could possibly mean... now, why would that be frustrating?" He grimaced.

"Or better," I continued, the pent-up annoyance flowing freely now, "say that person also did a wide range of bizarre things — from saving your life under impossible circumstances one day to treating you like a pariah the next, and he never explained any of that, either, even after he promised. That, also, would be very non-frustrating."

"You've got a bit of a temper, don't you?"

"I don't like double standards."

We stared at each other, unsmiling.

He glanced over my shoulder, and then, unexpectedly, he snickered.

"What?"

"Your boyfriend seems to think I'm being unpleasant to you — he's debating whether or not to come break up our fight." He snickered again.

"I don't know who you're talking about," I said frostily. "But I'm sure you're wrong, anyway."

"I'm not. I told you, most people are easy to read."

"Except me, of course."

"Yes. Except for you." His mood shifted suddenly; his eyes turned brooding. "I wonder why that is."

I had to look away from the intensity of his stare. I concentrated on unscrewing the lid of my lemonade. I took a swig, staring at the table without seeing it.

"Aren't you hungry?" he asked, distracted.

"No." I didn't feel like mentioning that my stomach was already full — of butterflies. "You?" I looked at the empty table in front of him.

"No, I'm not hungry." I didn't understand his expression — it looked like he was enjoying some private joke.

"Can you do me a favor?" I asked after a second of hesitation. He was suddenly wary. "That depends on what you want."

"It's not much," I assured him.

He waited, guarded but curious.

"I just wondered… if you could warn me beforehand the next time you decide to ignore me for my own

good. Just so I'm prepared." I looked at the lemonade bottle as I spoke, tracing the circle of the opening with my pinkie finger.

"That sounds fair." He was pressing his lips together to keep from laughing when I looked up.

"Thanks."

"Then can I have one answer in return?" he demanded.

"One."

"Tell me one theory."

Whoops. "Not that one."

"You didn't qualify, you just promised one answer," he reminded me.

"And you've broken promises yourself," I reminded him back.

"Just one theory — I won't laugh."

"Yes, you will." I was positive about that.

He looked down, and then glanced up at me through his long black lashes, his ocher eyes scorching.

"Please?" he breathed, leaning toward me.

I blinked, my mind going blank. Holy crow, how did he do that?

"Er, what?" I asked, dazed.

"Please tell me just one little theory." His eyes still smoldered at me.

"Um, well, bitten by a radioactive spider?" Was he a hypnotist, too? Or was I just a hopeless pushover?

"That's not very creative," he scoffed.

"I'm sorry, that's all I've got," I said, miffed.

"You're not even close," he teased.

"No spiders?"

"Nope."

"And no radioactivity?"

"None."

"Dang," I sighed.

"Kryptonite doesn't bother me, either," he chuckled.

"You're not supposed to laugh, remember?"

He struggled to compose his face.

"I'll figure it out eventually," I warned him.

"I wish you wouldn't try." He was serious again.

"Because... ?"

"What if I'm not a superhero? What if I'm the bad guy?" He smiled playfully, but his eyes were impenetrable.

"Oh," I said, as several things he'd hinted fell suddenly into place. "I see."

"Do you?" His face was abruptly severe, as if he were afraid that he'd accidentally said too much.

"You're dangerous?" I guessed, my pulse quickening as I intuitively realized the truth of my own words. He was dangerous. He'd been trying to tell me that all along.

He just looked at me, eyes full of some emotion I couldn't comprehend.

"But not bad," I whispered, shaking my head. "No, I don't believe that you're bad."

"You're wrong." His voice was almost inaudible. He looked down, stealing my bottle lid and then spinning it on its side between his fingers. I stared at him, wondering why I didn't feel afraid. He meant what he was saying — that was obvious. But I just felt anxious, on edge… and, more than anything else, fascinated. The same way I always felt when I was near him.

The silence lasted until I noticed that the cafeteria was almost empty. I jumped to my feet. "We're going to be late."

"I'm not going to class today," he said, twirling the lid so fast it was just a blur.

"Why not?"

"It's healthy to ditch class now and then." He smiled up at me, but his eyes were still troubled.

"Well, I'm going," I told him. I was far too big a coward to risk getting caught.

He turned his attention back to his makeshift top. "I'll see you later, then."

I hesitated, torn, but then the first bell sent me hurrying out the door

— with a last glance confirming that he hadn't moved a centimeter. As I half-ran to class, my head was spinning faster than the bottle cap. So few questions had been answered in comparison to how many new questions had been raised. At least the rain had stopped. I was lucky; Mr. Banner wasn't in the room yet when I arrived. I settled quickly into my seat, aware that both Mike and Angela were staring at me. Mike looked resentful; Angela looked surprised, and slightly awed. Mr. Banner came in the room then, calling the class to order. He was juggling a few small cardboard boxes in his arms. He put them down on Mike's table, telling him to start passing them around the class.

"Okay, guys, I want you all to take one piece from each box," he said as he produced a pair of rubber gloves from the pocket of his lab jacket and pulled them on. The sharp sound as the gloves snapped into place against his wrists seemed ominous to me. "The first should be an indicator card," he went on, grabbing a white card with four squares marked on it and displaying it. "The second is a four-pronged applicator —" he held up something that looked like a nearly toothless hair pick "— and the third is a sterile micro-lancet." He held up a small piece of blue plastic and split it open. The barb was invisible from this distance, but my stomach flipped.

"I'll be coming around with a dropper of water to prepare your cards, so please don't start until I get to you." He began at Mike's table again, carefully putting one drop of water in each of the four squares. "Then I want you to carefully prick your finger with the lancet..." He grabbed Mike's hand and jabbed the spike into the tip of Mike's middle finger. Oh no. Clammy moisture broke out across my forehead.

"Put a small drop of blood on each of the prongs." He demonstrated, squeezing Mike's finger till the blood flowed. I swallowed convulsively, my stomach heaving.

"And then apply it to the card," he finished, holding up the dripping red card for us to see. I closed my eyes, trying to hear through the ringing in my ears.

"The Red Cross is having a blood drive in Port Angeles next weekend, so I thought you should all know your blood type." He sounded proud of himself. "Those of you who aren't eighteen yet will need a parent's permission — I have slips at my desk."

He continued through the room with his water drops. I put my cheek against the cool black tabletop and tried to hold on to my consciousness. All around me I could hear squeals, complaints, and giggles as my classmates skewered their fingers. I breathed slowly in and out through my mouth.

"Bella, are you all right?" Mr. Banner asked. His voice was close to my head, and it sounded alarmed.

"I already know my blood type, Mr. Banner," I said in a weak voice. I was afraid to raise my head.

"Are you feeling faint?"

"Yes, sir," I muttered, internally kicking myself for not ditching when I had the chance.

"Can someone take Bella to the nurse, please?" he called. I didn't have to look up to know that it would be Mike who volunteered.

"Can you walk?" Mr. Banner asked.

"Yes," I whispered. Just let me get out of here, I thought. I'll crawl. Mike seemed eager as he put his arm around my waist and pulled my arm over his shoulder. I leaned against him heavily on the way out of the classroom.

Mike towed me slowly across campus. When we were around the edge of the cafeteria, out of sight of building four in case Mr. Banner was watching, I stopped.

"Just let me sit for a minute, please?" I begged. He helped me sit on the edge of the walk.

"And whatever you do, keep your hand in your pocket," I warned. I was still so dizzy. I slumped over on my side, putting my cheek against the freezing, damp cement of the sidewalk, closing my eyes. That seemed to help a little.

"Wow, you're green, Bella," Mike said nervously.

"Bella?" a different voice called from the distance. No! Please let me be imagining that horribly familiar voice.

"What's wrong — is she hurt?" His voice was closer now, and he sounded upset. I wasn't imagining it. I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping to die. Or, at the very least, not to throw up.

Mike seemed stressed. "I think she's fainted. I don't know what happened, she didn't even stick her finger."

"Bella." Edward's voice was right beside me, relieved now. "Can you hear me?"

"No," I groaned. "Go away."

He chuckled.

"I was taking her to the nurse," Mike explained in a defensive tone, "but she wouldn't go any farther."

"I'll take her," Edward said. I could hear the smile still in his voice.

"You can go back to class."

"No," Mike protested. "I'm supposed to do it." Suddenly the sidewalk disappeared from beneath me. My eyes flew open in shock. Edward had scooped me up in his arms, as easily as if I weighed ten pounds instead of a hundred and ten.

"Put me down!" Please, please let me not vomit on him. He was walking before I was finished talking.

"Hey!" Mike called, already ten paces behind us. Edward ignored him. "You look awful," he told me, grinning.

"Put me back on the sidewalk," I moaned. The rocking movement of his walk was not helping. He held me away from his body, gingerly, supporting all my weight with just his arms — it didn't seem to bother him.

"So you faint at the sight of blood?" he asked. This seemed to entertain him.

I didn't answer. I closed my eyes again and fought the nausea with all my strength, clamping my lips together.

"And not even your own blood," he continued, enjoying himself. I don't know how he opened the door while carrying me, but it was suddenly warm, so I knew we were inside.

"Oh my," I heard a female voice gasp.

"She fainted in Biology," Edward explained.

I opened my eyes. I was in the office, and Edward was striding past the front counter toward the nurse's door. Ms. Cope, the redheaded front office receptionist, ran ahead of him to hold it open. The grandmotherly nurse looked up from a novel, astonished, as Edward swung me into the room and placed me gently on the crackly paper that covered the brown vinyl mattress on the one cot. Then he moved to stand against the wall as far across the narrow room as possible. His eyes were bright, excited.

"She's just a little faint," he reassured the startled nurse. "They're blood typing in Biology."

The nurse nodded sagely. "There's always one."

He muffled a snicker.

"Just lie down for a minute, honey; it'll pass."

"I know," I sighed. The nausea was already fading.

"Does this happen a lot?" she asked.

"Sometimes," I admitted. Edward coughed to hide another laugh.

"You can go back to class now," she told him.

"I'm supposed to stay with her." He said this with such assured authority that — even though she pursed her lips — the nurse didn't argue it further.

"I'll go get you some ice for your forehead, dear," she said to me, and then bustled out of the room.

"You were right," I moaned, letting my eyes close.

"I usually am — but about what in particular this time?"

"Ditching is healthy." I practiced breathing evenly.

"You scared me for a minute there," he admitted after a pause. His tone made it sound like he was confessing a humiliating weakness. "I thought Newton was dragging your dead body off to bury it in the woods."

"Ha ha." I still had my eyes closed, but I was feeling more normal every minute.

"Honestly — I've seen corpses with better color. I was concerned that I might have to avenge your murder."

"Poor Mike. I'll bet he's mad."

"He absolutely loathes me," Edward said cheerfully.

"You can't know that," I argued, but then I wondered suddenly if he could.

"I saw his face — I could tell."

"How did you see me? I thought you were ditching." I was almost fine now, though the queasiness would probably pass faster if I'd eaten something for lunch. On the other hand, maybe it was lucky my stomach was empty.

"I was in my car, listening to a CD." Such a normal response — it surprised me.

I heard the door and opened my eyes to see the nurse with a cold compress in her hand.

"Here you go, dear." She laid it across my forehead. "You're looking better," she added.

"I think I'm fine," I said, sitting up. Just a little ringing in my ears, no spinning. The mint green walls stayed where they should. I could see she was about to make me lie back down, but the door opened just then, and Ms. Cope stuck her head in.

"We've got another one," she warned.

I hopped down to free up the cot for the next invalid.

I handed the compress back to the nurse. "Here, I don't need this." And then Mike staggered through the door, now supporting a sallow-looking Lee Stephens, another boy in our Biology class. Edward and I drew back against the wall to give them room.

"Oh no," Edward muttered. "Go out to the office, Bella." I looked up at him, bewildered.

"Trust me — go."

I spun and caught the door before it closed, darting out of the infirmary. I could feel Edward right behind me.

"You actually listened to me." He was stunned.

"I smelled the blood," I said, wrinkling my nose. Lee wasn't sick from watching other people, like me.

"People can't smell blood," he contradicted.

"Well, I can — that's what makes me sick. It smells like rust… and salt." He was staring at me with an unfathomable expression.

"What?" I asked.

"It's nothing."

Mike came through the door then, glancing from me to Edward. The look he gave Edward confirmed what Edward had said about loathing. He looked back at me, his eyes glum.

"You look better," he accused.

"Just keep your hand in your pocket," I warned him again.

"It's not bleeding anymore," he muttered. "Are you going back to class?"

"Are you kidding? I'd just have to turn around and come back."

"Yeah, I guess… So are you going this weekend? To the beach?" While he spoke, he flashed another glare toward Edward, who was standing against the cluttered counter, motionless as a sculpture, staring off into space. I tried to sound as friendly as possible. "Sure, I said I was in."

"We're meeting at my dad's store, at ten." His eyes flickered to Edward again, wondering if he was giving out too much information. His body language made it clear that it wasn't an open invitation.

"I'll be there," I promised.

"I'll see you in Gym, then," he said, moving uncertainly toward the door.

"See you," I replied. He looked at me once more, his round face slightly pouting, and then as he walked slowly through the door, his shoulders slumped. A swell of sympathy washed over me. I pondered seeing his disappointed face again… in Gym.

"Gym," I groaned.

"I can take care of that." I hadn't noticed Edward moving to my side, but he spoke now in my ear. "Go sit down and look pale," he muttered. That wasn't a

challenge; I was always pale, and my recent swoon had left a light sheen of sweat on my face. I sat in one of the creaky folding chairs and rested my head against the wall with my eyes closed. Fainting spells always exhausted me.

I heard Edward speaking softly at the counter.

"Ms. Cope?"

"Yes?" I hadn't heard her return to her desk.

"Bella has Gym next hour, and I don't think she feels well enough. Actually, I was thinking I should take her home now. Do you think you could excuse her from class?" His voice was like melting honey. I could imagine how much more overwhelming his eyes would be.

"Do you need to be excused, too, Edward?" Ms. Cope fluttered. Why couldn't I do that?

"No, I have Mrs. Goff, she won't mind."

"Okay, it's all taken care of. You feel better, Bella," she called to me. I nodded weakly, hamming it up just a bit.

"Can you walk, or do you want me to carry you again?" With his back to the receptionist, his expression became sarcastic.

"I'll walk."

I stood carefully, and I was still fine. He held the door for me, his smile polite but his eyes mocking. I walked out into the cold, fine mist that had just begun to fall.

It felt nice — the first time I'd enjoyed the constant moisture falling out of the sky — as it washed my face clean of the sticky perspiration.

"Thanks," I said as he followed me out. "It's almost worth getting sick to miss Gym."

"Anytime." He was staring straight forward, squinting into the rain.

"So are you going? This Saturday, I mean?" I was hoping he would, though it seemed unlikely. I couldn't picture him loading up to carpool with the rest of the kids from school; he didn't belong in the same world. But just hoping that he might gave me the first twinge of enthusiasm I'd felt for the outing.

"Where are you all going, exactly?" He was still looking ahead, expressionless.

"Down to La Push, to First Beach." I studied his face, trying to read it. His eyes seemed to narrow infinitesimally.

He glanced down at me from the corner of his eye, smiling wryly. "I really don't think I was invited."

I sighed. "I just invited you."

"Let's you and I not push poor Mike any further this week. We don't want him to snap." His eyes danced; he was enjoying the idea more than he should.

"Mike-schmike." I muttered, preoccupied by the way he'd said "you and I." I liked it more than I should.

We were near the parking lot now. I veered left, toward my truck. Something caught my jacket, yanking me back.

"Where do you think you're going?" he asked, outraged. He was gripping a fistful of my jacket in one hand.

I was confused. "I'm going home."

"Didn't you hear me promise to take you safely home? Do you think I'm going to let you drive in your condition?" His voice was still indignant.

"What condition? And what about my truck?" I complained.

"I'll have Alice drop it off after school." He was towing me toward his car now, pulling me by my jacket. It was all I could do to keep from falling backward. He'd probably just drag me along anyway if I did.

"Let go!" I insisted. He ignored me. I staggered along sideways across the wet sidewalk until we reached the Volvo. Then he finally freed me — I stumbled against the passenger door.

"You are so pushy!" I grumbled.

"It's open," was all he responded. He got in the driver's side.

"I am perfectly capable of driving myself home!" I stood by the car, fuming. It was raining harder now, and I'd never put my hood up, so my hair was dripping down my back.

He lowered the automatic window and leaned toward me across the seat.

"Get in, Bella."

I didn't answer. I was mentally calculating my chances of reaching the truck before he could catch me. I had to admit, they weren't good.

"I'll just drag you back," he threatened, guessing my plan. I tried to maintain what dignity I could as I got into his car. I wasn't very successful — I looked like a half-drowned cat and my boots squeaked.

"This is completely unnecessary," I said stiffly. He didn't answer. He fiddled with the controls, turning the heater up and the music down. As he pulled out of the parking lot, I was preparing to give him the silent treatment — my face in full pout mode — but then I recognized the music playing, and my curiosity got the better of my intentions.

"Clair de Lune?" I asked, surprised.

"You know Debussy?" He sounded surprised, too.

"Not well," I admitted. "My mother plays a lot of classical music around the house — I only know my favorites."

"It's one of my favorites, too." He stared out through the rain, lost in thought.

I listened to the music, relaxing against the light gray leather seat. It was impossible not to respond to the familiar, soothing melody. The rain blurred everything outside the window into gray and green smudges. I

began to realize we were driving very fast; the car moved so steadily, so evenly, though, I didn't feel the speed. Only the town flashing by gave it away.

"What is your mother like?" he asked me suddenly. I glanced over to see him studying me with curious eyes.

"She looks a lot like me, but she's prettier," I said. He raised his eyebrows. "I have too much Charlie in me. She's more outgoing than I am, and braver. She's irresponsible and slightly eccentric, and she's a very unpredictable cook. She's my best friend." I stopped. Talking about her was making me depressed.

"How old are you, Bella?" His voice sounded frustrated for some reason I couldn't imagine. He'd stopped the car, and I realized we were at Charlie's house already. The rain was so heavy that I could barely see the house at all. It was like the car was submerged under a river.

"I'm seventeen," I responded, a little confused.

"You don't seem seventeen."

His tone was reproachful; it made me laugh.

"What?" he asked, curious again.

"My mom always says I was born thirty-five years old and that I get more middle-aged every year." I laughed, and then sighed. "Well, someone has to be the adult." I paused for a second. "You don't seem much like a junior in high school yourself," I noted.

He made a face and changed the subject.

"So why did your mother marry Phil?"

I was surprised he would remember the name; I'd mentioned it just once, almost two months ago. It took me a moment to answer.

"My mother… she's very young for her age. I think Phil makes her feel even younger. At any rate, she's crazy about him." I shook my head. The attraction was a mystery to me.

"Do you approve?" he asked.

"Does it matter?" I countered. "I want her to be happy… and he is who she wants."

"That's very generous… I wonder," he mused.

"What?"

"Would she extend the same courtesy to you, do you think? No matter who your choice was?" He was suddenly intent, his eyes searching mine.

"I-I think so," I stuttered. "But she's the parent, after all. It's a little bit different."

"No one too scary then," he teased.

I grinned in response. "What do you mean by scary? Multiple facial piercings and extensive tattoos?"

"That's one definition, I suppose."

"What's your definition?"

But he ignored my question and asked me another. "Do you think that I could be scary?" He raised one

eyebrow, and the faint trace of a smile lightened his face.

I thought for a moment, wondering whether the truth or a lie would go over better. I decided to go with the truth. "Hmmm... I think you could be, if you wanted to."

"Are you frightened of me now?" The smile vanished, and his heavenly face was suddenly serious.

"No." But I answered too quickly. The smile returned.

"So, now are you going to tell me about your family?" I asked to distract him. "It's got to be a much more interesting story than mine." He was instantly cautious. "What do you want to know?"

"The Cullens adopted you?" I verified.

"Yes."

I hesitated for a moment. "What happened to your parents?"

"They died many years ago." His tone was matter-of-fact.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled.

"I don't really remember them that clearly. Carlisle and Esme have been my parents for a long time now."

"And you love them." It wasn't a question. It was obvious in the way he spoke of them.

"Yes." He smiled. "I couldn't imagine two better people."

"You're very lucky."

"I know I am."

"And your brother and sister?"

He glanced at the clock on the dashboard.

"My brother and sister, and Jasper and Rosalie for that matter, are going to be quite upset if they have to stand in the rain waiting for me."

"Oh, sorry, I guess you have to go." I didn't want to get out of the car.

"And you probably want your truck back before Chief Swan gets home, so you don't have to tell him about the Biology incident." He grinned at me.

"I'm sure he's already heard. There are no secrets in Forks." I sighed. He laughed, and there was an edge to his laughter.

"Have fun at the beach... good weather for sunbathing." He glanced out at the sheeting rain.

"Won't I see you tomorrow?"

"No. Emmett and I are starting the weekend early."

"What are you going to do?" A friend could ask that, right? I hoped the disappointment wasn't too apparent in my voice.

"We're going to be hiking in the Goat Rocks Wilderness, just south of Rainier."

I remembered Charlie had said the Cullens went camping frequently.

"Oh, well, have fun." I tried to sound enthusiastic. I don't think I fooled him, though. A smile was playing around the edges of his lips.

"Will you do something for me this weekend?" He turned to look me straight in the face, utilizing the full power of his burning gold eyes. I nodded helplessly.

"Don't be offended, but you seem to be one of those people who just attract accidents like a magnet. So... try not to fall into the ocean or get run over or anything, all right?" He smiled crookedly. The helplessness had faded as he spoke. I glared at him.

"I'll see what I can do," I snapped as I jumped out into the rain. I slammed the door behind me with excessive force.

He was still smiling as he drove away.

# Chapter 6

## SCARY STORIES

As I sat in my room, trying to concentrate on the third act of Macbeth, I was really listening for my truck. I would have thought, even over the pounding rain, I could have heard the engine's roar. But when I went to peek out the curtain — again — it was suddenly there.

I wasn't looking forward to Friday, and it more than lived up to my non-expectations. Of course there were the fainting comments. Jessica especially seemed to get a kick out of that story. Luckily Mike had kept his mouth shut, and no one seemed to know about Edward's involvement. She did have a lot of questions about lunch, though.

"So what did Edward Cullen want yesterday?" Jessica asked in Trig.

"I don't know," I answered truthfully. "He never really got to the point."

"You looked kind of mad," she fished.

"Did I?" I kept my expression blank.

"You know, I've never seen him sit with anyone but his family before. That was weird."

"Weird," I agreed. She seemed annoyed; she flipped her dark curls impatiently — I guessed she'd been hoping to hear something that would make a good story for her to pass on.

The worst part about Friday was that, even though I knew he wasn't going to be there, I still hoped. When I walked into the cafeteria with Jessica and Mike, I couldn't keep from looking at his table, where Rosalie, Alice, and Jasper sat talking, heads close together. And I couldn't stop the gloom that engulfed me as I realized I didn't know how long I would have to wait before I saw him again.

At my usual table, everyone was full of our plans for the next day. Mike was animated again, putting a great deal of trust in the local weatherman who promised sun tomorrow. I'd have to see that before I believed it. But it was warmer today — almost sixty. Maybe the outing wouldn't be completely miserable.

I intercepted a few unfriendly glances from Lauren during lunch, which I didn't understand until we were all walking out of the room together. I was right behind her, just a foot from her slick, silver blond hair, and she was evidently unaware of that.

"...don't know why Bella" — she sneered my name — "doesn't just sit with the Cullens from now on."

I heard her muttering to Mike. I'd never noticed what an unpleasant, nasal voice she had, and I was surprised by the malice in it. I really didn't know her well at all, certainly not well enough for her to dislike me — or so I'd thought. "She's my friend; she sits with us," Mike whispered back loyally, but also a bit territorially. I paused to let Jess and Angela pass me. I didn't want to hear any more.

That night at dinner, Charlie seemed enthusiastic about my trip to La Push in the morning. I think he

felt guilty for leaving me home alone on the weekends, but he'd spent too many years building his habits to break them now. Of course he knew the names of all the kids going, and their parents, and their great-grandparents, too, probably. He seemed to approve. I wondered if he would approve of my plan to ride to Seattle with Edward Cullen. Not that I was going to tell him.

"Dad, do you know a place called Goat Rocks or something like that? I think it's south of Mount Rainier," I asked casually.

"Yeah — why?"

I shrugged. "Some kids were talking about camping there."

"It's not a very good place for camping." He sounded surprised. "Too many bears. Most people go there during the hunting season."

"Oh," I murmured. "Maybe I got the name wrong." I meant to sleep in, but an unusual brightness woke me. I opened my eyes to see a clear yellow light streaming through my window. I couldn't believe it. I hurried to the window to check, and sure enough, there was the sun. It was in the wrong place in the sky, too low, and it didn't seem to be as close as it should be, but it was definitely the sun. Clouds ringed the horizon, but a large patch of blue was visible in the middle. I lingered by the window as long as I could, afraid that if I left the blue would disappear again.

The Newtons' Olympic Outfitters store was just north of town. I'd seen the store, but I'd never stopped there — not having much need for any supplies required for being outdoors over an extended period of time. In the parking lot I recognized Mike's Suburban and Tyler's Sentra. As I pulled up next to their vehicles, I could see the group standing around in front of the Suburban. Eric was there, along with two other boys I had class with; I was fairly sure their names were Ben and Conner. Jess was there, flanked by Angela and Lauren. Three other girls stood with them, including one I remembered falling over in Gym on Friday. That one gave me a dirty look as I got out of the truck, and whispered something to Lauren. Lauren shook out her cornsilk hair and eyed me scornfully. So it was going to be one of those days.

At least Mike was happy to see me.

"You came!" he called, delighted. "And I said it would be sunny today, didn't I?"

"I told you I was coming," I reminded him.

"We're just waiting for Lee and Samantha… unless you invited someone," Mike added.

"Nope," I lied lightly, hoping I wouldn't get caught in the lie. But also wishing that a miracle would occur, and Edward would appear. Mike looked satisfied.

"Will you ride in my car? It's that or Lee's mom's minivan."

"Sure."

He smiled blissfully. It was so easy to make Mike happy.

"You can have shotgun," he promised. I hid my chagrin. It wasn't as simple to make Mike and Jessica happy at the same time. I could see Jessica glowering at us now.

The numbers worked out in my favor, though. Lee brought two extra people, and suddenly every seat was necessary. I managed to wedge Jess in between Mike and me in the front seat of the Suburban. Mike could have been more graceful about it, but at least Jess seemed appeased.

It was only fifteen miles to La Push from Forks, with gorgeous, dense green forests edging the road most of the way and the wide Quillayute River snaking beneath it twice. I was glad I had the window seat. We'd rolled the windows down — the Suburban was a bit claustrophobic with nine people in it — and I tried to absorb as much sunlight as possible. I'd been to the beaches around La Push many times during my Forks summers with Charlie, so the mile-long crescent of First Beach was familiar to me. It was still breathtaking. The water was dark gray, even in the sunlight, white-capped and heaving to the gray, rocky shore. Islands rose out of the steel harbor waters with sheer cliff sides, reaching to uneven summits, and crowned with austere, soaring firs. The beach had only a thin border of actual sand at the water's edge, after which it grew into millions of large, smooth stones that looked uniformly gray from a distance, but close up were every shade a stone could be: terra-cotta, sea green, lavender, blue gray, dull gold. The

tide line was strewn with huge driftwood trees, bleached bone white in the salt waves, some piled together against the edge of the forest fringe, some lying solitary, just out of reach of the waves.

There was a brisk wind coming off the waves, cool and briny. Pelicans floated on the swells while seagulls and a lone eagle wheeled above them. The clouds still circled the sky, threatening to invade at any moment, but for now the sun shone bravely in its halo of blue sky. We picked our way down to the beach, Mike leading the way to a ring of driftwood logs that had obviously been used for parties like ours before. There was a fire circle already in place, filled with black ashes. Eric and the boy I thought was named Ben gathered broken branches of driftwood from the drier piles against the forest edge, and soon had a teepee-shaped construction built atop the old cinders.

"Have you ever seen a driftwood fire?" Mike asked me. I was sitting on one of the bone-colored benches; the other girls clustered, gossiping excitedly, on either side of me. Mike kneeled by the fire, lighting one of the smaller sticks with a cigarette lighter.

"No," I said as he placed the blazing twig carefully against the teepee.

"You'll like this then — watch the colors." He lit another small branch and laid it alongside the first. The flames started to lick quickly up the dry wood.

"It's blue," I said in surprise.

"The salt does it. Pretty, isn't it?" He lit one more piece, placed it where the fire hadn't yet caught, and then came to sit by me. Thankfully, Jess was on his other side. She turned to him and claimed his attention. I watched the strange blue and green flames crackle toward the sky. After a half hour of chatter, some of the boys wanted to hike to the nearby tidal pools. It was a dilemma. On the one hand, I loved the tide pools. They had fascinated me since I was a child; they were one of the only things I ever looked forward to when I had to come to Forks. On the other hand, I'd also fallen into them a lot. Not a big deal when you're seven and with your dad. It reminded me of Edward's request — that I not fall into the ocean.

Lauren was the one who made my decision for me. She didn't want to hike, and she was definitely wearing the wrong shoes for it. Most of the other girls besides Angela and Jessica decided to stay on the beach as well. I waited until Tyler and Eric had committed to remaining with them before I got up quietly to join the pro-hiking group. Mike gave me a huge smile when he saw that I was coming.

The hike wasn't too long, though I hated to lose the sky in the woods. The green light of the forest was strangely at odds with the adolescent laughter, too murky and ominous to be in harmony with the light banter around me. I had to watch each step I took very carefully, avoiding roots below and branches above, and I soon fell behind. Eventually I broke through the emerald confines of the forest and found the rocky shore again. It was low tide, and a tidal

river flowed past us on its way to the sea. Along its pebbled banks, shallow pools that never completely drained were teeming with life.

I was very cautious not to lean too far over the little ocean ponds. The others were fearless, leaping over the rocks, perching precariously on the edges. I found a very stable-looking rock on the fringe of one of the largest pools and sat there cautiously, spellbound by the natural aquarium below me. The bouquets of brilliant anemones undulated ceaselessly in the invisible current, twisted shells scurried about the edges, obscuring the crabs within them, starfish stuck motionless to the rocks and each other, while one small black eel with white racing stripes wove through the bright green weeds, waiting for the sea to return. I was completely absorbed, except for one small part of my mind that wondered what Edward was doing now, and trying to imagine what he would be saying if he were here with me.

Finally the boys were hungry, and I got up stiffly to follow them back. I tried to keep up better this time through the woods, so naturally I fell a few times. I got some shallow scrapes on my palms, and the knees of my jeans were stained green, but it could have been worse.

When we got back to First Beach, the group we'd left behind had multiplied. As we got closer we could see the shining, straight black hair and copper skin of the newcomers, teenagers from the reservation come to socialize.

The food was already being passed around, and the boys hurried to claim a share while Eric introduced us as we each entered the driftwood circle. Angela and I were the last to arrive, and, as Eric said our names, I noticed a younger boy sitting on the stones near the fire glance up at me in interest. I sat down next to Angela, and Mike brought us sandwiches and an array of sodas to choose from, while a boy who looked to be the oldest of the visitors rattled off the names of the seven others with him. All I caught was that one of the girls was also named Jessica, and the boy who noticed me was named Jacob.

It was relaxing to sit with Angela; she was a restful kind of person to be around — she didn't feel the need to fill every silence with chatter. She left me free to think undisturbed while we ate. And I was thinking about how disjointedly time seemed to flow in Forks, passing in a blur at times, with single images standing out more clearly than others. And then, at other times, every second was significant, etched in my mind. I knew exactly what caused the difference, and it disturbed me. During lunch the clouds started to advance, slinking across the blue sky, darting in front of the sun momentarily, casting long shadows across the beach, and blackening the waves. As they finished eating, people started to drift away in twos and threes. Some walked down to the edge of the waves, trying to skip rocks across the choppy surface. Others were gathering a second expedition to the tide pools. Mike — with Jessica shadowing him — headed up to the one shop in the village. Some of the local kids went with them; others went along on the hike. By the time they all had scattered, I was sitting alone

on my driftwood log, with Lauren and Tyler occupying themselves by the CD player someone had thought to bring, and three teenagers from the reservation perched around the circle, including the boy named Jacob and the oldest boy who had acted as spokesperson.

A few minutes after Angela left with the hikers, Jacob sauntered over to take her place by my side. He looked fourteen, maybe fifteen, and had long, glossy black hair pulled back with a rubber band at the nape of his neck. His skin was beautiful, silky and russet-colored; his eyes were dark, set deep above the high planes of his cheekbones. He still had just a hint of childish roundness left around his chin. Altogether, a very pretty face. However, my positive opinion of his looks was damaged by the first words out of his mouth.

"You're Isabella Swan, aren't you?"

It was like the first day of school all over again.

"Bella," I sighed.

"I'm Jacob Black." He held his hand out in a friendly gesture. "You bought my dad's truck."

"Oh," I said, relieved, shaking his sleek hand. "You're Billy's son. I probably should remember you."

"No, I'm the youngest of the family — you would remember my older sisters."

"Rachel and Rebecca," I suddenly recalled. Charlie and Billy had thrown us together a lot during my visits, to keep us busy while they fished. We were all

too shy to make much progress as friends. Of course, I'd kicked up enough tantrums to end the fishing trips by the time I was eleven.

"Are they here?" I examined the girls at the ocean's edge, wondering if I would recognize them now.

"No." Jacob shook his head. "Rachel got a scholarship to Washington State, and Rebecca married a Samoan surfer — she lives in Hawaii now."

"Married. Wow." I was stunned. The twins were only a little over a year older than I was.

"So how do you like the truck?" he asked.

"I love it. It runs great."

"Yeah, but it's really slow," he laughed. "I was so relived when Charlie bought it. My dad wouldn't let me work on building another car when we had a perfectly good vehicle right there."

"It's not that slow," I objected.

"Have you tried to go over sixty?"

"No," I admitted.

"Good. Don't." He grinned.

I couldn't help grinning back. "It does great in a collision," I offered in my truck's defense.

"I don't think a tank could take out that old monster," he agreed with another laugh.

"So you build cars?" I asked, impressed.

"When I have free time, and parts. You wouldn't happen to know where I could get my hands on a master cylinder for a 1986 Volkswagen Rabbit?" he added jokingly. He had a pleasant, husky voice.

"Sorry," I laughed, "I haven't seen any lately, but I'll keep my eyes open for you." As if I knew what that was. He was very easy to talk with. He flashed a brilliant smile, looking at me appreciatively in a way I was learning to recognize. I wasn't the only one who noticed.

"You know Bella, Jacob?" Lauren asked — in what I imagined was an insolent tone — from across the fire.

"We've sort of known each other since I was born," he laughed, smiling at me again.

"How nice." She didn't sound like she thought it was nice at all, and her pale, fishy eyes narrowed.

"Bella," she called again, watching my face carefully, "I was just saying to Tyler that it was too bad none of the Cullens could come out today. Didn't anyone think to invite them?" Her expression of concern was unconvincing.

"You mean Dr. Carlisle Cullen's family?" the tall, older boy asked before I could respond, much to Lauren's irritation. He was really closer to a man than a boy, and his voice was very deep.

"Yes, do you know them?" she asked condescendingly, turning halfway toward him.

"The Cullens don't come here," he said in a tone that closed the subject, ignoring her question.

Tyler, trying to win back her attention, asked Lauren's opinion on a CD

he held. She was distracted.

I stared at the deep-voiced boy, taken aback, but he was looking away toward the dark forest behind us. He'd said that the Cullens didn't come here, but his tone had implied something more — that they weren't allowed; they were prohibited. His manner left a strange impression on me, and I tried to ignore it without success.

Jacob interrupted my meditation. "So is Forks driving you insane yet?"

"Oh, I'd say that's an understatement." I grimaced. He grinned understandingly.

I was still turning over the brief comment on the Cullens, and I had a sudden inspiration. It was a stupid plan, but I didn't have any better ideas. I hoped that young Jacob was as yet inexperienced around girls, so that he wouldn't see through my sure-to-be-pitiful attempts at flirting.

"Do you want to walk down the beach with me?" I asked, trying to imitate that way Edward had of looking up from underneath his eyelashes. It couldn't have nearly the same effect, I was sure, but Jacob jumped up willingly enough.

As we walked north across the multihued stones toward the driftwood seawall, the clouds finally closed ranks across the sky, causing the sea to darken and

the temperature to drop. I shoved my hands deep into the pockets of my jacket.

"So you're, what, sixteen?" I asked, trying not to look like an idiot as I fluttered my eyelids the way I'd seen girls do on TV.

"I just turned fifteen," he confessed, flattered.

"Really?" My face was full of false surprise. "I would have thought you were older."

"I'm tall for my age," he explained.

"Do you come up to Forks much?" I asked archly, as if I was hoping for a yes. I sounded idiotic to myself. I was afraid he would turn on me with disgust and accuse me of my fraud, but he still seemed flattered.

"Not too much," he admitted with a frown. "But when I get my car finished I can go up as much as I want — after I get my license," he amended.

"Who was that other boy Lauren was talking to? He seemed a little old to be hanging out with us." I purposefully lumped myself in with the youngsters, trying to make it clear that I preferred Jacob.

"That's Sam — he's nineteen," he informed me.

"What was that he was saying about the doctor's family?" I asked innocently.

"The Cullens? Oh, they're not supposed to come onto the reservation." He looked away, out toward James Island, as he confirmed what I'd thought I'd heard in Sam's voice.

"Why not?"

He glanced back at me, biting his lip. "Oops. I'm not supposed to say anything about that."

"Oh, I won't tell anyone, I'm just curious." I tried to make my smile alluring, wondering if I was laying it on too thick.

He smiled back, though, looking allured. Then he lifted one eyebrow and his voice was even huskier than before.

"Do you like scary stories?" he asked ominously.

"I love them," I enthused, making an effort to smolder at him. Jacob strolled to a nearby driftwood tree that had its roots sticking out like the attenuated legs of a huge, pale spider. He perched lightly on one of the twisted roots while I sat beneath him on the body of the tree. He stared down at the rocks, a smile hovering around the edges of his broad lips. I could see he was going to try to make this good. I focused on keeping the vital interest I felt out of my eyes.

"Do you know any of our old stories, about where we came from — the Quileutes, I mean?" he began.

"Not really," I admitted.

"Well, there are lots of legends, some of them claiming to date back to the Flood — supposedly, the ancient Quileutes tied their canoes to the tops of the tallest trees on the mountain to survive like Noah and the ark." He smiled, to show me how little stock he put in the histories.

"Another legend claims that we descended from wolves — and that the wolves are our brothers still. It's against tribal law to kill them.

"Then there are the stories about the cold ones." His voice dropped a little lower.

"The cold ones?" I asked, not faking my intrigue now.

"Yes. There are stories of the cold ones as old as the wolf legends, and some much more recent. According to legend, my own great-grandfather knew some of them. He was the one who made the treaty that kept them off our land." He rolled his eyes.

"Your great-grandfather?" I encouraged.

"He was a tribal elder, like my father. You see, the cold ones are the natural enemies of the wolf—well, not the wolf, really, but the wolves that turn into men, like our ancestors. You would call them werewolves."

"Werewolves have enemies?"

"Only one."

I stared at him earnestly, hoping to disguise my impatience as admiration.

"So you see," Jacob continued, "the cold ones are traditionally our enemies. But this pack that came to our territory during my great-grandfather's time was different. They didn't hunt the way others of their kind did — they weren't supposed to be dangerous to the tribe. So my great-grandfather made a truce with them. If they would promise to stay off our lands, we

wouldn't expose them to the pale-faces." He winked at me.

"If they weren't dangerous, then why… ?" I tried to understand, struggling not to let him see how seriously I was considering his ghost story.

"There's always a risk for humans to be around the cold ones, even if they're civilized like this clan was. You never know when they might get too hungry to resist." He deliberately worked a thick edge of menace into his tone.

"What do you mean, 'civilized'?"

"They claimed that they didn't hunt humans. They supposedly were somehow able to prey on animals instead."

I tried to keep my voice casual. "So how does it fit in with the Cullens?

Are they like the cold ones your greatgrandfather met?"

"No." He paused dramatically. "They are the same ones." He must have thought the expression on my face was fear inspired by his story. He smiled, pleased, and continued.

"There are more of them now, a new female and a new male, but the rest are the same. In my great-grandfather's time they already knew of the leader, Carlisle. He'd been here and gone before your people had even arrived." He was fighting a smile.

"And what are they?" I finally asked. "What are the cold ones?" He smiled darkly.

"Blood drinkers," he replied in a chilling voice. "Your people call them vampires."

I stared out at the rough surf after he answered, not sure what my face was exposing.

"You have goose bumps," he laughed delightedly.

"You're a good storyteller," I complimented him, still staring into the waves.

"Pretty crazy stuff, though, isn't it? No wonder my dad doesn't want us to talk about it to anyone."

I couldn't control my expression enough to look at him yet. "Don't worry, I won't give you away."

"I guess I just violated the treaty," he laughed.

"I'll take it to the grave," I promised, and then I shivered.

"Seriously, though, don't say anything to Charlie. He was pretty mad at my dad when he heard that some of us weren't going to the hospital since Dr. Cullen started working there."

"I won't, of course not."

"So do you think we're a bunch of superstitious natives or what?" he asked in a playful tone, but with a hint of worry. I still hadn't looked away from the ocean.

I turned and smiled at him as normally as I could.

"No. I think you're very good at telling scary stories, though. I still have goose bumps, see?" I held up my arm.

"Cool." He smiled.

And then the sound of the beach rocks clattering against each other warned us that someone was approaching. Our heads snapped up at the same time to see Mike and Jessica about fifty yards away, walking toward us.

"There you are, Bella," Mike called in relief, waving his arm over his head.

"Is that your boyfriend?" Jacob asked, alerted by the jealous edge in Mike's voice. I was surprised it was so obvious.

"No, definitely not," I whispered. I was tremendously grateful to Jacob, and eager to make him as happy as possible. I winked at him, carefully turning away from Mike to do so. He smiled, elated by my inept flirting.

"So when I get my license..." he began.

"You should come see me in Forks. We could hang out sometime." I felt guilty as I said this, knowing that I'd used him. But I really did like Jacob. He was someone I could easily be friends with.

Mike had reached us now, with Jessica still a few paces back. I could see his eyes appraising Jacob, and looking satisfied at his obvious youth.

"Where have you been?" he asked, though the answer was right in front of him.

"Jacob was just telling me some local stories," I volunteered. "It was really interesting."

I smiled at Jacob warmly, and he grinned back.

"Well," Mike paused, carefully reassessing the situation as he watched our camaraderie. "We're packing up — it looks like it's going to rain soon."

We all looked up at the glowering sky. It certainly did look like rain.

"Okay." I jumped up. "I'm coming."

"It was nice to see you again," Jacob said, and I could tell he was taunting Mike just a bit.

"It really was. Next time Charlie comes down to see Billy, I'll come, too," I promised.

His grin stretched across his face. "That would be cool."

"And thanks," I added earnestly.

I pulled up my hood as we tramped across the rocks toward the parking lot. A few drops were beginning to fall, making black spots on the stones where they landed. When we got to the Suburban the others were already loading everything back in. I crawled into the backseat by Angela and Tyler, announcing that I'd already had my turn in the shotgun position. Angela just stared out the window at the escalating storm, and Lauren twisted around in the middle seat to occupy Tyler's attention, so I could simply lay my head back on the seat and close my eyes and try very hard not to think.

# Chapter 7

## NIGHTMARE

I told Charlie I had a lot of homework to do, and that I didn't want anything to eat. There was a basketball game on that he was excited about, though of course I had no idea what was special about it, so he wasn't aware of anything unusual in my face or tone.

Once in my room, I locked the door. I dug through my desk until I found my old headphones, and I plugged them into my little CD player. I picked up a CD that Phil had given to me for Christmas. It was one of his favorite bands, but they used a little too much bass and shrieking for my tastes. I popped it into place and lay down on my bed. I put on the headphones, hit Play, and turned up the volume until it hurt my ears. I closed my eyes, but the light still intruded, so I added a pillow over the top half of my face.

I concentrated very carefully on the music, trying to understand the lyrics, to unravel the complicated drum patterns. By the third time I'd listened through the CD, I knew all the words to the choruses, at least. I was surprised to find that I really did like the band after all, once I got past the blaring noise. I'd have to thank Phil again. And it worked. The shattering beats made it impossible for me to think —

which was the whole purpose of the exercise. I listened to the CD again and again, until I was singing along with all the songs, until, finally, I fell asleep.

I opened my eyes to a familiar place. Aware in some corner of my consciousness that I was dreaming, I recognized the green light of the forest. I could hear the waves crashing against the rocks somewhere nearby. And I knew that if I found the ocean, I'd be able to see the sun. I was trying to follow the sound, but then Jacob Black was there, tugging on my hand, pulling me back toward the blackest part of the forest.

"Jacob? What's wrong?" I asked. His face was frightened as he yanked with all his strength against my resistance; I didn't want to go into the dark.

"Run, Bella, you have to run!" he whispered, terrified.

"This way, Bella!" I recognized Mike's voice calling out of the gloomy heart of the trees, but I couldn't see him.

"Why?" I asked, still pulling against Jacob's grasp, desperate now to find the sun.

But Jacob let go of my hand and yelped, suddenly shaking, falling to the dim forest floor. He twitched on the ground as I watched in horror.

"Jacob!" I screamed. But he was gone. In his place was a large red-brown wolf with black eyes. The wolf faced away from me, pointing toward the shore, the hair on the back of his shoulders bristling, low growls issuing from between his exposed fangs.

"Bella, run!" Mike cried out again from behind me. But I didn't turn. I was watching a light coming toward me from the beach.

And then Edward stepped out from the trees, his skin faintly glowing, his eyes black and dangerous. He held up one hand and beckoned me to come to him. The wolf growled at my feet.

I took a step forward, toward Edward. He smiled then, and his teeth were sharp, pointed.

"Trust me," he purred.

I took another step.

The wolf launched himself across the space between me and the vampire, fangs aiming for the jugular.

"No!" I screamed, wrenching upright out of my bed. My sudden movement caused the headphones to pull the CD player off the bedside table, and it clattered to the wooden floor.

My light was still on, and I was sitting fully dressed on the bed, with my shoes on. I glanced, disoriented, at the clock on my dresser. It was five-thirty in the morning.

I groaned, fell back, and rolled over onto my face, kicking off my boots. I was too uncomfortable to get anywhere near sleep, though. I rolled back over and unbuttoned my jeans, yanking them off awkwardly as I tried to stay horizontal. I could feel the braid in my hair, an uncomfortable ridge along the back of my skull. I turned onto my side and ripped the rubber band out, quickly combing through the plaits with my fingers. I pulled the pillow back over my eyes.

It was all no use, of course. My subconscious had dredged up exactly the images I'd been trying so

desperately to avoid. I was going to have to face them now.

I sat up, and my head spun for a minute as the blood flowed downward. First things first, I thought to myself, happy to put it off as long as possible. I grabbed my bathroom bag.

The shower didn't last nearly as long as I hoped it would, though. Even taking the time to blow-dry my hair, I was soon out of things to do in the bathroom. Wrapped in a towel, I crossed back to my room. I couldn't tell if Charlie was still asleep, or if he had already left. I went to look out my window, and the cruiser was gone. Fishing again. I dressed slowly in my most comfy sweats and then made my bed — something I never did. I couldn't put it off any longer. I went to my desk and switched on my old computer.

I hated using the Internet here. My modem was sadly outdated, my free service substandard; just dialing up took so long that I decided to go get myself a bowl of cereal while I waited.

I ate slowly, chewing each bite with care. When I was done, I washed the bowl and spoon, dried them, and put them away. My feet dragged as I climbed the stairs. I went to my CD player first, picking it up off the floor and placing it precisely in the center of the table. I pulled out the headphones, and put them away in the desk drawer. Then I turned the same CD on, turning it down to the point where it was background noise. With another sigh, I turned to my computer. Naturally, the screen was covered in pop-up ads. I sat in my hard folding chair and began

closing all the little windows. Eventually I made it to my favorite search engine. I shot down a few more pop-ups and then typed in one word. Vampire.

It took an infuriatingly long time, of course. When the results came up, there was a lot to sift through — everything from movies and TV shows to role-playing games, underground metal, and gothic cosmetic companies. Then I found a promising site — Vampires A—Z. I waited impatiently for it to load, quickly clicking closed each ad that flashed across the screen. Finally the screen was finished — simple white background with black text, academic-looking. Two quotes greeted me on the home page: Throughout the vast shadowy world of ghosts and demons there is no figure so terrible, no figure so dreaded and abhorred, yet dight with such fearful fascination, as the vampire, who is himself neither ghost nor demon, but yet who partakes the dark natures and possesses the mysterious and terrible qualities of both. — Rev. Montague Summers

If there is in this world a well-attested account, it is that of the vampires. Nothing is lacking: official reports, affidavits of well-known people, of surgeons, of priests, of magistrates; the judicial proof is most complete. And with all that, who is there who believes in vampires?

— Rousseau

The rest of the site was an alphabetized listing of all the different myths of vampires held throughout the world. The first I clicked on, the Danag, was a Filipino vampire supposedly responsible for planting taro on

the islands long ago. The myth continued that the Danag worked with humans for many years, but the partnership ended one day when a woman cut her finger and a Danag sucked her wound, enjoying the taste so much that it drained her body completely of blood.

I read carefully through the descriptions, looking for anything that sounded familiar, let alone plausible. It seemed that most vampire myths centered around beautiful women as demons and children as victims; they also seemed like constructs created to explain away the high mortality rates for young children, and to give men an excuse for infidelity. Many of the stories involved bodiless spirits and warnings against improper burials. There wasn't much that sounded like the movies I'd seen, and only a very few, like the Hebrew Estrie and the Polish Upier, who were even preoccupied with drinking blood.

Only three entries really caught my attention: the Romanian Varacolaci, a powerful undead being who could appear as a beautiful, pale-skinned human, the Slovak Nelapsi, a creature so strong and fast it could massacre an entire village in the single hour after midnight, and one other, the Stregoni benefici.

About this last there was only one brief sentence.

Stregoni benefici: An Italian vampire, said to be on the side of goodness, and a mortal enemy of all evil vampires.

It was a relief, that one small entry, the one myth among hundreds that claimed the existence of good vampires.

Overall, though, there was little that coincided with Jacob's stories or my own observations. I'd made a little catalogue in my mind as I'd read and carefully compared it with each myth. Speed, strength, beauty, pale skin, eyes that shift color; and then Jacob's criteria: blood drinkers, enemies of the werewolf, cold-skinned, and immortal. There were very few myths that matched even one factor.

And then another problem, one that I'd remembered from the small number of scary movies that I'd seen and was backed up by today's reading —

vampires couldn't come out in the daytime, the sun would burn them to a cinder. They slept in coffins all day and came out only at night. Aggravated, I snapped off the computer's main power switch, not waiting to shut things down properly. Through my irritation, I felt overwhelming embarrassment. It was all so stupid. I was sitting in my room, researching vampires. What was wrong with me? I decided that most of the blame belonged on the doorstep of the town of Forks — and the entire sodden Olympic Peninsula, for that matter.

I had to get out of the house, but there was nowhere I wanted to go that didn't involve a three-day drive. I pulled on my boots anyway, unclear where I was headed, and went downstairs. I shrugged into my raincoat without checking the weather and stomped out the door.

It was overcast, but not raining yet. I ignored my truck and started east on foot, angling across Charlie's yard toward the ever-encroaching forest. It

didn't take long till I was deep enough for the house and the road to be invisible, for the only sound to be the squish of the damp earth under my feet and the sudden cries of the jays.

There was a thin ribbon of a trail that led through the forest here, or I wouldn't risk wandering on my own like this. My sense of direction was hopeless; I could get lost in much less helpful surroundings. The trail wound deeper and deeper into the forest, mostly east as far as I could tell. It snaked around the Sitka spruces and the hemlocks, the yews and the maples. I only vaguely knew the names of the trees around me, and all I knew was due to Charlie pointing them out to me from the cruiser window in earlier days. There were many I didn't know, and others I couldn't be sure about because they were so covered in green parasites. I followed the trail as long as my anger at myself pushed me forward. As that started to ebb, I slowed. A few drops of moisture trickled down from the canopy above me, but I couldn't be certain if it was beginning to rain or if it was simply pools left over from yesterday, held high in the leaves above me, slowly dripping their way back to the earth. A recently fallen tree — I knew it was recent because it wasn't entirely carpeted in moss — rested against the trunk of one of her sisters, creating a sheltered little bench just a few safe feet off the trail. I stepped over the ferns and sat carefully, making sure my jacket was between the damp seat and my clothes wherever they touched, and leaned my hooded head back against the living tree.

This was the wrong place to have come. I should have known, but where else was there to go? The forest was deep green and far too much like the scene in last night's dream to allow for peace of mind. Now that there was no longer the sound of my soggy footsteps, the silence was piercing. The birds were quiet, too, the drops increasing in frequency, so it must be raining above. The ferns stood higher than my head, now that I was seated, and I knew someone could walk by on the path, three feet away, and not see me.

Here in the trees it was much easier to believe the absurdities that embarrassed me indoors. Nothing had changed in this forest for thousands of years, and all the myths and legends of a hundred different lands seemed much more likely in this green haze than they had in my clear-cut bedroom.

I forced myself to focus on the two most vital questions I had to answer, but I did so unwillingly.

First, I had to decide if it was possible that what Jacob had said about the Cullens could be true.

Immediately my mind responded with a resounding negative. It was silly and morbid to entertain such ridiculous notions. But what, then? I asked myself. There was no rational explanation for how I was alive at this moment. I listed again in my head the things I'd observed myself: the impossible speed and strength, the eye color shifting from black to gold and back again, the inhuman beauty, the pale, frigid skin. And more —

small things that registered slowly — how they never seemed to eat, the disturbing grace with which they moved. And the way be

sometimes spoke, with unfamiliar cadences and phrases that better fit the style of a turn-of-the-century novel than that of a twenty-first-century classroom. He had skipped class the day we'd done blood typing. He hadn't said no to the beach trip till he heard where we were going. He seemed to know what everyone around him was thinking... except me. He had told me he was the villain, dangerous...

Could the Cullens be vampires?

Well, they were something. Something outside the possibility of rational justification was taking place in front of my incredulous eyes. Whether it be Jacob's cold ones or my own superhero theory, Edward Cullen was not... human. He was something more.

So then — maybe. That would have to be my answer for now. And then the most important question of all. What was I going to do if it was true?

If Edward was a vampire — I could hardly make myself think the words —

then what should I do? Involving someone else was definitely out. I couldn't even believe myself; anyone I told would have me committed. Only two options seemed practical. The first was to take his advice: to be smart, to avoid him as much as possible. To cancel our plans, to go back to ignoring him as far as I was able. To pretend there was an impenetrably thick glass wall between us in the one class where we were

forced together. To tell him to leave me alone — and mean it this time. I was gripped in a sudden agony of despair as I considered that alternative. My mind rejected the pain, quickly skipping on to the next option.

I could do nothing different. After all, if he was something… sinister, he'd done nothing to hurt me so far. In fact, I would be a dent in Tyler's fender if he hadn't acted so quickly. So quickly, I argued with myself, that it might have been sheer reflexes. But if it was a reflex to save lives, how bad could he be? I retorted. My head spun around in answerless circles.

There was one thing I was sure of, if I was sure of anything. The dark Edward in my dream last night was a reflection only of my fear of the word Jacob had spoken, and not Edward himself. Even so, when I'd screamed out in terror at the werewolf's lunge, it wasn't fear for the wolf that brought the cry of "no" to my lips. It was fear that he would be harmed —

even as he called to me with sharp-edged fangs, I feared for him. And I knew in that I had my answer. I didn't know if there ever was a choice, really. I was already in too deep. Now that I knew — if I knew —

I could do nothing about my frightening secret. Because when I thought of him, of his voice, his hypnotic eyes, the magnetic force of his personality, I wanted nothing more than to be with him right now. Even if… but I couldn't think it. Not here, alone in the darkening forest. Not while the rain made it dim as twilight under the canopy and pattered like footsteps across the matted earthen floor. I shivered and rose

quickly from my place of concealment, worried that somehow the path would have disappeared with the rain.

But it was there, safe and clear, winding its way out of the dripping green maze. I followed it hastily, my hood pulled close around my face, becoming surprised, as I nearly ran through the trees, at how far I had come. I started to wonder if I was heading out at all, or following the path farther into the confines of the forest. Before I could get too panicky, though, I began to glimpse some open spaces through the webbed branches. And then I could hear a car passing on the street, and I was free, Charlie's lawn stretched out in front of me, the house beckoning me, promising warmth and dry socks.

It was just noon when I got back inside. I went upstairs and got dressed for the day, jeans and a t-shirt, since I was staying indoors. It didn't take too much effort to concentrate on my task for the day, a paper on Macbeth that was due Wednesday. I settled into outlining a rough draft contentedly, more serene than I'd felt since… well, since Thursday afternoon, if I was being honest.

That had always been my way, though. Making decisions was the painful part for me, the part I agonized over. But once the decision was made, I simply followed through — usually with relief that the choice was made. Sometimes the relief was tainted by despair, like my decision to come to Forks. But it was still better than wrestling with the alternatives. This decision was ridiculously easy to live with. Dangerously easy. And so the day was quiet,

productive — I finished my paper before eight. Charlie came home with a large catch, and I made a mental note to pick up a book of recipes for fish while I was in Seattle next week. The chills that flashed up my spine whenever I thought of that trip were no different than the ones I'd felt before I'd taken my walk with Jacob Black. They should be different, I thought. I should be afraid — I knew I should be, but I couldn't feel the right kind of fear.

I slept dreamlessly that night, exhausted from beginning my day so early, and sleeping so poorly the night before. I woke, for the second time since arriving in Forks, to the bright yellow light of a sunny day. I skipped to the window, stunned to see that there was hardly a cloud in the sky, and those there were just fleecy little white puffs that couldn't possibly be carrying any rain. I opened the window — surprised when it opened silently, without sticking, not having opened it in who knows how many years — and sucked in the relatively dry air. It was nearly warm and hardly windy at all. My blood was electric in my veins. Charlie was finishing breakfast when I came downstairs, and he picked up on my mood immediately.

"Nice day out," he commented.

"Yes," I agreed with a grin.

He smiled back, his brown eyes crinkling around the edges. When Charlie smiled, it was easier to see why he and my mother had jumped too quickly into an early marriage. Most of the young romantic he'd been in those days had faded before I'd known him, as the

curly brown hair — the same color, if not the same texture, as mine — had dwindled, slowly revealing more and more of the shiny skin of his forehead. But when he smiled I could see a little of the man who had run away with Renée when she was just two years older than I was now.

I ate breakfast cheerily, watching the dust moats stirring in the sunlight that streamed in the back window. Charlie called out a goodbye, and I heard the cruiser pull away from the house. I hesitated on my way out the door, hand on my rain jacket. It would be tempting fate to leave it home. With a sigh, I folded it over my arm and stepped out into the brightest light I'd seen in months.

By dint of much elbow grease, I was able to get both windows in the truck almost completely rolled down. I was one of the first ones to school; I hadn't even checked the clock in my hurry to get outside. I parked and headed toward the seldom-used picnic benches on the south side of the cafeteria. The benches were still a little damp, so I sat on my jacket, glad to have a use for it. My homework was done — the product of a slow social life — but there were a few Trig problems I wasn't sure I had right. I took out my book industriously, but halfway through rechecking the first problem I was daydreaming, watching the sunlight play on the red-barked trees. I sketched inattentively along the margins of my homework. After a few minutes, I suddenly realized I'd drawn five pairs of dark eyes staring out of the page at me. I scrubbed them out with the eraser.

"Bella!" I heard someone call, and it sounded like Mike. I looked around to realize that the school had become populated while I'd been sitting there, absentminded. Everyone was in t-shirts, some even in shorts though the temperature couldn't be over sixty. Mike was coming toward me in khaki shorts and a striped Rugby shirt, waving.

"Hey, Mike," I called, waving back, unable to be halfhearted on a morning like this.

He came to sit by me, the tidy spikes of his hair shining golden in the light, his grin stretching across his face. He was so delighted to see me, I couldn't help but feel gratified.

"I never noticed before — your hair has red in it," he commented, catching between his fingers a strand that was fluttering in the light breeze.

"Only in the sun."

I became just a little uncomfortable as he tucked the lock behind my ear.

"Great day, isn't it?"

"My kind of day," I agreed.

"What did you do yesterday?" His tone was just a bit too proprietary.

"I mostly worked on my essay." I didn't add that I was finished with it —

no need to sound smug.

He hit his forehead with the heel of his hand. "Oh yeah — that's due Thursday, right?"

"Um, Wednesday, I think."

"Wednesday?" He frowned. "That's not good... What are you writing yours on?"

"Whether Shakespeare's treatment of the female characters is misogynistic."

He stared at me like I'd just spoken in pig Latin.

"I guess I'll have to get to work on that tonight," he said, deflated. "I was going to ask if you wanted to go out."

"Oh." I was taken off guard. Why couldn't I ever have a pleasant conversation with Mike anymore without it getting awkward?

"Well, we could go to dinner or something... and I could work on it later." He smiled at me hopefully.

"Mike..." I hated being put on the spot. "I don't think that would be the best idea."

His face fell. "Why?" he asked, his eyes guarded. My thoughts flickered to Edward, wondering if that's where his thoughts were as well.

"I think... and if you ever repeat what I'm saying right now I will cheerfully beat you to death," I threatened, "but I think that would hurt Jessica's feelings."

He was bewildered, obviously not thinking in that direction at all.

"Jessica?"

"Really, Mike, are you blind?"

"Oh," he exhaled — clearly dazed. I took advantage of that to make my escape.

"It's time for class, and I can't be late again." I gathered my books up and stuffed them in my bag.

We walked in silence to building three, and his expression was distracted. I hoped whatever thoughts he was immersed in were leading him in the right direction.

When I saw Jessica in Trig, she was bubbling with enthusiasm. She, Angela, and Lauren were going to Port Angeles tonight to go dress shopping for the dance, and she wanted me to come, too, even though I didn't need one. I was indecisive. It would be nice to get out of town with some girlfriends, but Lauren would be there. And who knew what I could be doing tonight… But that was definitely the wrong path to let my mind wander down. Of course I was happy about the sunlight. But that wasn't completely responsible for the euphoric mood I was in, not even close.

So I gave her a maybe, telling her I'd have to talk with Charlie first. She talked of nothing but the dance on the way to Spanish, continuing as if without an interruption when class finally ended, five minutes late, and we were on our way to lunch. I was far too lost in my own frenzy of anticipation to notice much of what she said. I was painfully eager to see not just him but all the Cullens — to compare them with the new suspicions that plagued my mind. As I crossed

the threshold of the cafeteria, I felt the first true tingle of fear slither down my spine and settle in my stomach. Would they be able to know what I was thinking? And then a different feeling jolted through me — would Edward be waiting to sit with me again?

As was my routine, I glanced first toward the Cullens' table. A shiver of panic trembled in my stomach as I realized it was empty. With dwindling hope, my eyes scoured the rest of the cafeteria, hoping to find him alone, waiting for me. The place was nearly filled — Spanish had made us late — but there was no sign of Edward or any of his family. Desolation hit me with crippling strength.

I shambled along behind Jessica, not bothering to pretend to listen anymore.

We were late enough that everyone was already at our table. I avoided the empty chair next to Mike in favor of one by Angela. I vaguely noticed that Mike held the chair out politely for Jessica, and that her face lit up in response.

Angela asked a few quiet questions about the Macbeth paper, which I answered as naturally as I could while spiraling downward in misery. She, too, invited me to go with them tonight, and I agreed now, grasping at anything to distract myself.

I realized I'd been holding on to a last shred of hope when I entered Biology, saw his empty seat, and felt a new wave of disappointment. The rest of the day passed slowly, dismally. In Gym, we had a lecture on the rules of badminton, the next torture they had lined up for me. But at least it meant I got to sit and

listen instead of stumbling around on the court. The best part was the coach didn't finish, so I got another day off tomorrow. Never mind that the day after they would arm me with a racket before unleashing me on the rest of the class.

I was glad to leave campus, so I would be free to pout and mope before I went out tonight with Jessica and company. But right after I walked in the door of Charlie's house, Jessica called to cancel our plans. I tried to be happy that Mike had asked her out to dinner — I really was relieved that he finally seemed to be catching on — but my enthusiasm sounded false in my own ears. She rescheduled our shopping trip for tomorrow night.

Which left me with little in the way of distractions. I had fish marinating for dinner, with a salad and bread left over from the night before, so there was nothing to do there. I spent a focused half hour on homework, but then I was through with that, too. I checked my e-mail, reading the backlog of letters from my mother, getting snippier as they progressed to the present. I sighed and typed a quick response. Mom,

Sorry. I've been out. I went to the beach with some friends. And I had to write a paper.

My excuses were fairly pathetic, so I gave up on that.

It's sunny outside today - I know, I'm shocked, too - so I'm going to go outside and soak up as much vitamin D as I can. I love you, Bella.

I decided to kill an hour with non-school-related reading. I had a small collection of books that came

with me to Forks, the shabbiest volume being a compilation of the works of Jane Austen. I selected that one and headed to the backyard, grabbing a ragged old quilt from the linen cupboard at the top of the stairs on my way down.

Outside in Charlie's small, square yard, I folded the quilt in half and laid it out of the reach of the trees' shadows on the thick lawn that would always be slightly wet, no matter how long the sun shone. I lay on my stomach, crossing my ankles in the air, flipping through the different novels in the book, trying to decide which would occupy my mind the most thoroughly. My favorites were Pride and Prejudice and Sense and Sensibility. I'd read the first most recently, so I started into Sense and Sensibility, only to remember after I began three that the hero of the story happened to be named Edward. Angrily, I turned to Mansfield Park, but the hero of that piece was named Edmund, and that was just too close. Weren't there any other names available in the late eighteenth century? I snapped the book shut, annoyed, and rolled over onto my back. I pushed my sleeves up as high as they would go, and closed my eyes. I would think of nothing but the warmth on my skin, I told myself severely. The breeze was still light, but it blew tendrils of my hair around my face, and that tickled a bit. I pulled all my hair over my head, letting it fan out on the quilt above me, and focused again on the heat that touched my eyelids, my cheekbones, my nose, my lips, my forearms, my neck, soaked through my light shirt…

The next thing I was conscious of was the sound of Charlie's cruiser turning onto the bricks of the driveway. I sat up in surprise, realizing the light was gone, behind the trees, and I had fallen asleep. I looked around, muddled, with the sudden feeling that I wasn't alone.

"Charlie?" I asked. But I could hear his door slamming in front of the house.

I jumped up, foolishly edgy, gathering the now-damp quilt and my book. I ran inside to get some oil heating on the stove, realizing that dinner would be late. Charlie was hanging up his gun belt and stepping out of his boots when I came in.

"Sorry, Dad, dinner's not ready yet — I fell asleep outside." I stifled a yawn.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "I wanted to catch the score on the game, anyway."

I watched TV with Charlie after dinner, for something to do. There wasn't anything on I wanted to watch, but he knew I didn't like baseball, so he turned it to some mindless sitcom that neither of us enjoyed. He seemed happy, though, to be doing something together. And it felt good, despite my depression, to make him happy.

"Dad," I said during a commercial, "Jessica and Angela are going to look at dresses for the dance tomorrow night in Port Angeles, and they wanted me to help them choose... do you mind if I go with them?"

"Jessica Stanley?" he asked.

"And Angela Weber." I sighed as I gave him the details. He was confused. "But you're not going to the dance, right?"

"No, Dad, but I'm helping them find dresses — you know, giving them constructive criticism." I wouldn't have to explain this to a woman.

"Well, okay." He seemed to realize that he was out of his depth with the girlie stuff. "It's a school night, though."

"We'll leave right after school, so we can get back early. You'll be okay for dinner, right?"

"Bells, I fed myself for seventeen years before you got here," he reminded me.

"I don't know how you survived," I muttered, then added more clearly,

"I'll leave some things for cold-cut sandwiches in the fridge, okay?

Right on top."

It was sunny again in the morning. I awakened with renewed hope that I grimly tried to suppress. I dressed for the warmer weather in a deep blue V-neck blouse — something I'd worn in the dead of winter in Phoenix. I had planned my arrival at school so that I barely had time to make it to class. With a sinking heart, I circled the full lot looking for a space, while also searching for the silver Volvo that was clearly not there. I parked in the last row and hurried to English, arriving breathless, but subdued, before the final bell.

It was the same as yesterday — I just couldn't keep little sprouts of hope from budding in my mind, only to have them squashed painfully as I searched the lunchroom in vain and sat at my empty Biology table. The Port Angeles scheme was back on again for tonight and made all the more attractive by the fact that Lauren had other obligations. I was anxious to get out of town so I could stop glancing over my shoulder, hoping to see him appearing out of the blue the way he always did. I vowed to myself that I would be in a good mood tonight and not ruin Angela's or Jessica's enjoyment in the dress hunting. Maybe I could do a little clothes shopping as well. I refused to think that I might be shopping alone in Seattle this weekend, no longer interested in the earlier arrangement. Surely he wouldn't cancel without at least telling me.

After school, Jessica followed me home in her old white Mercury so that I could ditch my books and truck. I brushed through my hair quickly when I was inside, feeling a slight lift of excitement as I contemplated getting out of Forks. I left a note for Charlie on the table, explaining again where to find dinner, switched my scruffy wallet from my school bag to a purse I rarely used, and ran out to join Jessica. We went to Angela's house next, and she was waiting for us. My excitement increased exponentially as we actually drove out of the town limits.

# Chapter 8

## PORT ANGELES

Jess drove faster than the Chief, so we made it to Port Angeles by four. It had been a while since I'd had a girls' night out, and the estrogen rush was invigorating. We listened to whiny rock songs while Jessica jabbered on about the boys we hung out with. Jessica's dinner with Mike had gone very well, and she was hoping that by Saturday night they would have progressed to the first-kiss stage. I smiled to myself, pleased. Angela was passively happy to be going to the dance, but not really interested in Eric. Jess tried to get her to confess who her type was, but I interrupted with a question about dresses after a bit, to spare her. Angela threw a grateful glance my way.

Port Angeles was a beautiful little tourist trap, much more polished and quaint than Forks. But Jessica and Angela knew it well, so they didn't plan to waste time on the picturesque boardwalk by the bay. Jess drove straight to the one big department store in town, which was a few streets in from the bay area's visitor-friendly face.

The dance was billed as semiformal, and we weren't exactly sure what that meant. Both Jessica and Angela seemed surprised and almost disbelieving when I told them I'd never been to a dance in Phoenix.

"Didn't you ever go with a boyfriend or something?" Jess asked dubiously as we walked through the front doors of the store.

"Really," I tried to convince her, not wanting to confess my dancing problems. "I've never had a boyfriend or anything close. I didn't go out much."

"Why not?" Jessica demanded.

"No one asked me," I answered honestly.

She looked skeptical. "People ask you out here," she reminded me, "and you tell them no." We were in the juniors' section now, scanning the racks for dress-up clothes.

"Well, except for Tyler," Angela amended quietly.

"Excuse me?" I gasped. "What did you say?"

"Tyler told everyone he's taking you to prom," Jessica informed me with suspicious eyes.

"He said what?" I sounded like I was choking.

"I told you it wasn't true," Angela murmured to Jessica. I was silent, still lost in shock that was quickly turning to irritation. But we had found the dress racks, and now we had work to do.

"That's why Lauren doesn't like you," Jessica giggled while we pawed through the clothes.

I ground my teeth. "Do you think that if I ran him over with my truck he would stop feeling guilty about the accident? That he might give up on making amends and call it even?"

"Maybe," Jess snickered. '"If that's why he's doing this." The dress selection wasn't large, but both of them found a few things to try on. I sat on a low chair just inside the dressing room, by the three-way mirror, trying to control my fuming.

Jess was torn between two — one a long, strapless, basic black number, the other a knee-length electric blue with spaghetti straps. I encouraged her to go with the blue; why not play up the eyes? Angela chose a pale pink dress that draped around her tall frame nicely and brought out honey tints in her light brown hair. I complimented them both generously and helped by returning the rejects to their racks. The whole process was much shorter and easier than similar trips I'd taken with Renée at home. I guess there was something to be said for limited choices. We headed over to shoes and accessories. While they tried things on I merely watched and critiqued, not in the mood to shop for myself, though I did need new shoes. The girls'-night high was wearing off in the wake of my annoyance at Tyler, leaving room for the gloom to move back in.

"Angela?" I began, hesitant, while she was trying on a pair of pink strappy heels — she was overjoyed to have a date tall enough that she could wear high heels at all.

Jessica had drifted to the jewelry counter and we were alone.

"Yes?" She held her leg out, twisting her ankle to get a better view of the shoe.

I chickened out. "I like those."

"I think I'll get them — though they'll never match anything but the one dress," she mused.

"Oh, go ahead — they're on sale," I encouraged. She smiled, putting the lid back on a box that contained more practical-looking off-white shoes. I tried again. "Um, Angela…" She looked up curiously.

"Is it normal for the… Cullens" — I kept my eyes on the shoes — "to be out of school a lot?" I failed miserably in my attempt to sound nonchalant.

"Yes, when the weather is good they go backpacking all the time — even the doctor. They're all real outdoorsy," she told me quietly, examining her shoes, too. She didn't ask one question, let alone the hundreds that Jessica would have unleashed. I was beginning to really like Angela.

"Oh." I let the subject drop as Jessica returned to show us the rhinestone jewelry she'd found to match her silver shoes. We planned to go to dinner at a little Italian restaurant on the boardwalk, but the dress shopping hadn't taken as long as we'd expected. Jess and Angela were going to take their clothes back to the car and then walk down to the bay. I told them I would meet them at the restaurant in an hour — I wanted to look for a bookstore. They were both willing to come with me, but I encouraged them to go have fun — they didn't know how preoccupied I could get when surrounded by books; it was something I preferred to do alone. They walked off to the car chattering happily, and I headed in the direction Jess pointed out.

I had no trouble finding the bookstore, but it wasn't what I was looking for. The windows were full of crystals, dream-catchers, and books about spiritual healing. I didn't even go inside. Through the glass I could see a fifty-year-old woman with long, gray hair worn straight down her back, clad in a dress right out of the sixties, smiling welcomingly from behind the counter. I decided that was one conversation I could skip. There had to be a normal bookstore in town.

I meandered through the streets, which were filling up with end-of-the-workday traffic, and hoped I was headed toward downtown. I wasn't paying as much attention as I should to where I was going; I was wrestling with despair. I was trying so hard not to think about him, and what Angela had said… and more than anything trying to beat down my hopes for Saturday, fearing a disappointment more painful than the rest, when I looked up to see someone's silver Volvo parked along the street and it all came crashing down on me. Stupid, unreliable vampire, I thought to myself.

I stomped along in a southerly direction, toward some glass-fronted shops that looked promising. But when I got to them, they were just a repair shop and a vacant space. I still had too much time to go looking for Jess and Angela yet, and I definitely needed to get my mood in hand before I met back up with them. I ran my fingers through my hair a couple of times and took some deep breaths before I continued around the corner. I started to realize, as I crossed another road, that I was going the wrong direction. The little foot traffic I had seen was going north, and it looked like

the buildings here were mostly warehouses. I decided to turn east at the next corner, and then loop around after a few blocks and try my luck on a different street on my way back to the boardwalk. A group of four men turned around the corner I was heading for, dressed too casually to be heading home from the office, but they were too grimy to be tourists. As they approached me, I realized they weren't too many years older than I was. They were joking loudly among themselves, laughing raucously and punching each other's arms. I scooted as far to the inside of the sidewalk as I could to give them room, walking swiftly, looking past them to the corner.

"Hey, there!" one of them called as they passed, and he had to be talking to me since no one else was around. I glanced up automatically. Two of them had paused, the other two were slowing. The closest, a heavyset, dark-haired man in his early twenties, seemed to be the one who had spoken. He was wearing a flannel shirt open over a dirty t-shirt, cut-off jeans, and sandals. He took half a step toward me.

"Hello," I mumbled, a knee-jerk reaction. Then I quickly looked away and walked faster toward the corner. I could hear them laughing at full volume behind me.

"Hey, wait!" one of them called after me again, but I kept my head down and rounded the corner with a sigh of relief. I could still hear them chortling behind me.

I found myself on a sidewalk leading past the backs of several somber-colored warehouses, each with large

bay doors for unloading trucks, padlocked for the night. The south side of the street had no sidewalk, only a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire protecting some kind of engine parts storage yard. I'd wandered far past the part of Port Angeles that I, as a guest, was intended to see. It was getting dark, I realized, the clouds finally returning, piling up on the western horizon, creating an early sunset. The eastern sky was still clear, but graying, shot through with streaks of pink and orange. I'd left my jacket in the car, and a sudden shiver made me cross my arms tightly across my chest. A single van passed me, and then the road was empty.

The sky suddenly darkened further, and, as I looked over my shoulder to glare at the offending cloud, I realized with a shock that two men were walking quietly twenty feet behind me.

They were from the same group I'd passed at the corner, though neither was the dark one who'd spoken to me. I turned my head forward at once, quickening my pace. A chill that had nothing to do with the weather made me shiver again. My purse was on a shoulder strap and I had it slung across my body, the way you were supposed to wear it so it wouldn't get snatched. I knew exactly where my pepper spray was — still in my duffle bag under the bed, never unpacked. I didn't have much money with me, just a twenty and some ones, and I thought about "accidentally" dropping my bag and walking away. But a small, frightened voice in the back of my mind warned me that they might be something worse than thieves. I listened intently to their quiet footsteps,

which were much too quiet when compared to the boisterous noise they'd been making earlier, and it didn't sound like they were speeding up, or getting any closer to me. Breathe, I had to remind myself. You don't know they're following you. I continued to walk as quickly as I could without actually running, focusing on the right-hand turn that was only a few yards away from me now. I could hear them, staying as far back as they'd been before. A blue car turned onto the street from the south and drove quickly past me. I thought of jumping out in front of it, but I hesitated, inhibited, unsure that I was really being pursued, and then it was too late. I reached the corner, but a swift glance revealed that it was only a blind drive to the back of another building. I was half-turned in anticipation; I had to hurriedly correct and dash across the narrow drive, back to the sidewalk. The street ended at the next corner, where there was a stop sign. I concentrated on the faint footsteps behind me, deciding whether or not to run. They sounded farther back, though, and I knew they could outrun me in any case. I was sure to trip and go sprawling if I tried to go any faster. The footfalls were definitely farther back. I risked a quick glance over my shoulder, and they were maybe forty feet back now, I saw with relief. But they were both staring at me.

It seemed to take forever for me to get to the corner. I kept my pace steady, the men behind me falling ever so slightly farther behind with every step. Maybe they realized they had scared me and were sorry. I saw two cars going north pass the intersection I was heading for, and I exhaled in relief. There would be more

people around once I got off this deserted street. I skipped around the corner with a grateful sigh. And skidded to a stop.

The street was lined on both sides by blank, doorless, windowless walls. I could see in the distance, two intersections down, streetlamps, cars, and more pedestrians, but they were all too far away. Because lounging against the western building, midway down the street, were the other two men from the group, both watching with excited smiles as I froze dead on the sidewalk. I realized then that I wasn't being followed. I was being herded.

I paused for only a second, but it felt like a very long time. I turned then and darted to the other side of the road. I had a sinking feeling that it was a wasted attempt. The footsteps behind me were louder now.

"There you are!" The booming voice of the stocky, dark-haired man shattered the intense quiet and made me jump. In the gathering darkness, it seemed like he was looking past me.

"Yeah," a voice called loudly from behind me, making me jump again as I tried to hurry down the street. "We just took a little detour." My steps had to slow now. I was closing the distance between myself and the lounging pair too quickly. I had a good loud scream, and I sucked in air, preparing to use it, but my throat was so dry I wasn't sure how much volume I could manage. With a quick movement I slipped my purse over my head, gripping the strap with one hand, ready to surrender it or use it as weapon as need demanded.

The thickset man shrugged away from the wall as I warily came to a stop, and walked slowly into the street.

"Stay away from me," I warned in a voice that was supposed to sound strong and fearless. But I was right about the dry throat — no volume.

"Don't be like that, sugar," he called, and the raucous laughter started again behind me.

I braced myself, feet apart, trying to remember through my panic what little self-defense I knew. Heel of the hand thrust upward, hopefully breaking the nose or shoving it into the brain. Finger through the eye socket — try to hook around and pop the eye out. And the standard knee to the groin, of course. That same pessimistic voice in my mind spoke up then, reminding me that I probably wouldn't have a chance against one of them, and there were four. Shut up! I commanded the voice before terror could incapacitate me. I wasn't going out without taking someone with me. I tried to swallow so I could build up a decent scream.

Headlights suddenly flew around the corner, the car almost hitting the stocky one, forcing him to jump back toward the sidewalk. I dove into the road — this car was going to stop, or have to hit me. But the silver car unexpectedly fishtailed around, skidding to a stop with the passenger door open just a few feet from me.

"Get in," a furious voice commanded.

It was amazing how instantaneously the choking fear vanished, amazing how suddenly the feeling of

security washed over me — even before I was off the street — as soon as I heard his voice. I jumped into the seat, slamming the door shut behind me.

It was dark in the car, no light had come on with the opening of the door, and I could barely see his face in the glow from the dashboard. The tires squealed as he spun around to face north, accelerating too quickly, swerving toward the stunned men on the street. I caught a glimpse of them diving for the sidewalk as we straightened out and sped toward the harbor.

"Put on your seat belt," he commanded, and I realized I was clutching the seat with both hands. I quickly obeyed; the snap as the belt connected was loud in the darkness. He took a sharp left, racing forward, blowing through several stop signs without a pause.

But I felt utterly safe and, for the moment, totally unconcerned about where we were going. I stared at his face in profound relief, relief that went beyond my sudden deliverance. I studied his flawless features in the limited light, waiting for my breath to return to normal, until it occurred to me that his expression was murderously angry.

"Are you okay?" I asked, surprised at how hoarse my voice sounded.

"No," he said curtly, and his tone was livid.

I sat in silence, watching his face while his blazing eyes stared straight ahead, until the car came to a sudden stop. I glanced around, but it was too dark to see anything beside the vague outline of dark trees crowding the roadside. We weren't in town anymore.

"Bella?" he asked, his voice tight, controlled.

"Yes?" My voice was still rough. I tried to clear my throat quietly.

"Are you all right?" He still didn't look at me, but the fury was plain on his face.

"Yes," I croaked softly.

"Distract me, please," he ordered.

"I'm sorry, what?"

He exhaled sharply.

"Just prattle about something unimportant until I calm down," he clarified, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger.

"Um." I wracked my brain for something trivial. "I'm going to run over Tyler Crowley tomorrow before school?"

He was still squeezing his eyes closed, but the corner of his mouth twitched.

"Why?"

"He's telling everyone that he's taking me to prom — either he's insane or he's still trying to make up for almost killing me last... well, you remember it, and he thinks prom is somehow the correct way to do this. So I figure if I endanger his life, then we're even, and he can't keep trying to make amends. I don't need enemies and maybe Lauren would back off if he left me alone. I might have to total his Sentra, though. If

he doesn't have a ride he can't take anyone to prom..." I babbled on.

"I heard about that." He sounded a bit more composed.

"You did?" I asked in disbelief, my previous irritation flaring. "If he's paralyzed from the neck down, he can't go to the prom, either," I muttered, refining my plan.

Edward sighed, and finally opened his eyes.

"Better?"

"Not really."

I waited, but he didn't speak again. He leaned his head back against the seat, staring at the ceiling of the car. His face was rigid.

"What's wrong?" My voice came out in a whisper.

"Sometimes I have a problem with my temper, Bella." He was whispering, too, and as he stared out the window, his eyes narrowed into slits. "But it wouldn't be helpful for me to turn around and hunt down those..." He didn't finish his sentence, looking away, struggling for a moment to control his anger again. "At least," he continued, "that's what I'm trying to convince myself."

"Oh." The word seemed inadequate, but I couldn't think of a better response.

We sat in silence again. I glanced at the clock on the dashboard. It was past six-thirty.

"Jessica and Angela will be worried," I murmured. "I was supposed to meet them."

He started the engine without another word, turning around smoothly and speeding back toward town. We were under the streetlights in no time at all, still going too fast, weaving with ease through the cars slowly cruising the boardwalk. He parallel-parked against the curb in a space I would have thought much too small for the Volvo, but he slid in effortlessly in one try. I looked out the window to see the lights of La Bella Italia, and Jess and Angela just leaving, pacing anxiously away from us.

"How did you know where... ?" I began, but then I just shook my head. I heard the door open and turned to see him getting out.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm taking you to dinner." He smiled slightly, but his eyes were hard. He stepped out of the car and slammed the door. I fumbled with my seat belt, and then hurried to get out of the car as well. He was waiting for me on the sidewalk.

He spoke before I could. "Go stop Jessica and Angela before I have to track them down, too. I don't think I could restrain myself if I ran into your other friends again."

I shivered at the threat in his voice.

"Jess! Angela!" I yelled after them, waving when they turned. They rushed back to me, the pronounced relief on both their faces simultaneously changing to

surprise as they saw who I was standing next to. They hesitated a few feet from us.

"Where have you been?" Jessica's voice was suspicious.

"I got lost," I admitted sheepishly. "And then I ran into Edward." I gestured toward him.

"Would it be all right if I joined you?" he asked in his silken, irresistible voice. I could see from their staggered expressions that he had never unleashed his talents on them before.

"Er… sure," Jessica breathed.

"Um, actually, Bella, we already ate while we were waiting — sorry," Angela confessed.

"That's fine — I'm not hungry." I shrugged.

"I think you should eat something." Edward's voice was low, but full of authority. He looked up at Jessica and spoke slightly louder. "Do you mind if I drive Bella home tonight? That way you won't have to wait while she eats."

"Uh, no problem, I guess…" She bit her lip, trying to figure out from my expression whether that was what I wanted. I winked at her. I wanted nothing more than to be alone with my perpetual savior. There were so many questions that I couldn't bombard him with till we were by ourselves.

"Okay." Angela was quicker than Jessica. "See you tomorrow, Bella…

Edward." She grabbed Jessica's hand and pulled her toward the car, which I could see a little ways away, parked across First Street. As they got in, Jess turned and waved, her face eager with curiosity. I waved back, waiting for them to drive away before I turned to face him.

"Honestly, I'm not hungry," I insisted, looking up to scrutinize his face. His expression was unreadable.

"Humor me."

He walked to the door of the restaurant and held it open with an obstinate expression. Obviously, there would be no further discussion. I walked past him into the restaurant with a resigned sigh. The restaurant wasn't crowded — it was the off-season in Port Angeles. The host was female, and I understood the look in her eyes as she assessed Edward. She welcomed him a little more warmly than necessary. I was surprised by how much that bothered me. She was several inches taller than I was, and unnaturally blond.

"A table for two?" His voice was alluring, whether he was aiming for that or not. I saw her eyes flicker to me and then away, satisfied by my obvious ordinariness, and by the cautious, no-contact space Edward kept between us. She led us to a table big enough for four in the center of the most crowded area of the dining floor.

I was about to sit, but Edward shook his head at me.

"Perhaps something more private?" he insisted quietly to the host. I wasn't sure, but it looked like he

smoothly handed her a tip. I'd never seen anyone refuse a table except in old movies.

"Sure." She sounded as surprised as I was. She turned and led us around a partition to a small ring of booths — all of them empty. "How's this?"

"Perfect." He flashed his gleaming smile, dazing her momentarily.

"Um" — she shook her head, blinking — "your server will be right out." She walked away unsteadily.

"You really shouldn't do that to people," I criticized. "It's hardly fair."

"Do what?"

"Dazzle them like that — she's probably hyperventilating in the kitchen right now."

He seemed confused.

"Oh, come on," I said dubiously. "You have to know the effect you have on people."

He tilted his head to one side, and his eyes were curious. "I dazzle people?"

"You haven't noticed? Do you think everybody gets their way so easily?" He ignored my questions. "Do I dazzle you?"

"Frequently," I admitted.

And then our server arrived, her face expectant. The hostess had definitely dished behind the scenes, and this new girl didn't look disappointed. She flipped a

strand of short black hair behind one ear and smiled with unnecessary warmth.

"Hello. My name is Amber, and I'll be your server tonight. What can I get you to drink?" I didn't miss that she was speaking only to him. He looked at me.

"I'll have a Coke." It sounded like a question.

"Two Cokes," he said.

"I'll be right back with that," she assured him with another unnecessary smile. But he didn't see it. He was watching me.

"What?" I asked when she left.

His eyes stayed fixed on my face. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine," I replied, surprised by his intensity.

"You don't feel dizzy, sick, cold… ?"

"Should I?"

He chuckled at my puzzled tone.

"Well, I'm actually waiting for you to go into shock." His face twisted up into that perfect crooked smile.

"I don't think that will happen," I said after I could breathe again.

"I've always been very good at repressing unpleasant things."

"Just the same, I'll feel better when you have some sugar and food in you."

Right on cue, the waitress appeared with our drinks and a basket of breadsticks. She stood with her back to me as she placed them on the table.

"Are you ready to order?" she asked Edward.

"Bella?" he asked. She turned unwillingly toward me. I picked the first thing I saw on the menu. "Um... I'll have the mushroom ravioli."

"And you?" She turned back to him with a smile.

"Nothing for me," he said. Of course not.

"Let me know if you change your mind." The coy smile was still in place, but he wasn't looking at her, and she left dissatisfied.

"Drink," he ordered.

I sipped at my soda obediently, and then drank more deeply, surprised by how thirsty I was. I realized I had finished the whole thing when he pushed his glass toward me.

"Thanks," I muttered, still thirsty. The cold from the icy soda was radiating through my chest, and I shivered.

"Are you cold?"

"It's just the Coke," I explained, shivering again.

"Don't you have a jacket?" His voice was disapproving.

"Yes." I looked at the empty bench next to me. "Oh — I left it in Jessica's car," I realized.

Edward was shrugging out of his jacket. I suddenly realized that I had never once noticed what he was wearing — not just tonight, but ever. I just couldn't seem to look away from his face. I made myself look now, focusing. He was removing a light beige leather jacket now; underneath he wore an ivory turtleneck sweater. It fit him snugly, emphasizing how muscular his chest was.

He handed me the jacket, interrupting my ogling.

"Thanks," I said again, sliding my arms into his jacket. It was cold —

the way my jacket felt when I first picked it up in the morning, hanging in the drafty hallway. I shivered again. It smelled amazing. I inhaled, trying to identify the delicious scent. It didn't smell like cologne. The sleeves were much too long; I shoved them back so I could free my hands.

"That color blue looks lovely with your skin," he said, watching me. I was surprised; I looked down, flushing, of course.

He pushed the bread basket toward me.

"Really, I'm not going into shock," I protested.

"You should be — a normal person would be. You don't even look shaken." He seemed unsettled. He stared into my eyes, and I saw how light his eyes were, lighter than I'd ever seen them, golden butterscotch.

"I feel very safe with you," I confessed, mesmerized into telling the truth again.

That displeased him; his alabaster brow furrowed. He shook his head, frowning.

"This is more complicated than I'd planned," he murmured to himself. I picked up a breadstick and began nibbling on the end, measuring his expression. I wondered when it would be okay to start questioning him.

"Usually you're in a better mood when your eyes are so light," I commented, trying to distract him from whatever thought had left him frowning and somber.

He stared at me, stunned. "What?"

"You're always crabbier when your eyes are black — I expect it then," I went on. "I have a theory about that."

His eyes narrowed. "More theories?"

"Mm-hm." I chewed on a small bite of the bread, trying to look indifferent.

"I hope you were more creative this time… or are you still stealing from comic books?" His faint smile was mocking; his eyes were still tight.

"Well, no, I didn't get it from a comic book, but I didn't come up with it on my own, either," I confessed.

"And?" he prompted.

But then the waitress strode around the partition with my food. I realized we'd been unconsciously leaning toward each other across the table, because

we both straightened up as she approached. She set the dish in front of me — it looked pretty good — and turned quickly to Edward.

"Did you change your mind?" she asked. "Isn't there anything I can get you?" I may have been imagining the double meaning in her words.

"No, thank you, but some more soda would be nice." He gestured with a long white hand to the empty cups in front of me.

"Sure." She removed the empty glasses and walked away.

"You were saying?" he asked.

"I'll tell you about it in the car. If..." I paused.

"There are conditions?" He raised one eyebrow, his voice ominous.

"I do have a few questions, of course."

"Of course."

The waitress was back with two more Cokes. She sat them down without a word this time, and left again.

I took a sip.

"Well, go ahead," he pushed, his voice still hard. I started with the most undemanding. Or so I thought. "Why are you in Port Angeles?"

He looked down, folding his large hands together slowly on the table. His eyes flickered up at me from under his lashes, the hint of a smirk on his face.

"Next."

"But that's the easiest one," I objected.

"Next," he repeated.

I looked down, frustrated. I unrolled my silverware, picked up my fork, and carefully speared a ravioli. I put it in my mouth slowly, still looking down, chewing while I thought. The mushrooms were good. I swallowed and took another sip of Coke before I looked up.

"Okay, then." I glared at him, and continued slowly. "Let's say, hypothetically of course, that… someone… could know what people are thinking, read minds, you know — with a few exceptions."

"Just one exception," he corrected, "hypothetically."

"All right, with one exception, then." I was thrilled that he was playing along, but I tried to seem casual.

"How does that work? What are the limitations? How would… that someone…

find someone else at exactly the right time? How would he know she was in trouble?" I wondered if my convoluted questions even made sense.

"Hypothetically?" he asked.

"Sure."

"Well, if… that someone…"

"Let's call him 'Joe,'" I suggested.

He smiled wryly. "Joe, then. If Joe had been paying attention, the timing wouldn't have needed to be quite so exact." He shook his head, rolling his eyes. "Only you could get into trouble in a town this small. You would have devastated their crime rate statistics for a decade, you know."

"We were speaking of a hypothetical case," I reminded him frostily. He laughed at me, his eyes warm.

"Yes, we were," he agreed. "Shall we call you 'Jane'?"

"How did you know?" I asked, unable to curb my intensity. I realized I was leaning toward him again.

He seemed to be wavering, torn by some internal dilemma. His eyes locked with mine, and I guessed he was making the decision right then whether or not to simply tell me the truth.

"You can trust me, you know," I murmured. I reached forward, without thinking, to touch his folded hands, but he slid them away minutely, and I pulled my hand back.

"I don't know if I have a choice anymore." His voice was almost a whisper. "I was wrong — you're much more observant than I gave you credit for."

"I thought you were always right."

"I used to be." He shook his head again. "I was wrong about you on one other thing, as well. You're not a magnet for accidents — that's not a broad enough classification. You are a magnet for trouble. If there is anything dangerous within a ten-mile radius, it will invariably find you."

"And you put yourself into that category?" I guessed. His face turned cold, expressionless. "Unequivocally." I stretched my hand across the table again — ignoring him when he pulled back slightly once more — to touch the back of his hand shyly with my fingertips. His skin was cold and hard, like a stone.

"Thank you." My voice was fervent with gratitude. "That's twice now." His face softened. "Let's not try for three, agreed?" I scowled, but nodded. He moved his hand out from under mine, placing both of his under the table. But he leaned toward me.

"I followed you to Port Angeles," he admitted, speaking in a rush. "I've never tried to keep a specific person alive before, and it's much more troublesome than I would have believed. But that's probably just because it's you. Ordinary people seem to make it through the day without so many catastrophes." He paused. I wondered if it should bother me that he was following me; instead I felt a strange surge of pleasure. He stared, maybe wondering why my lips were curving into an involuntary smile.

"Did you ever think that maybe my number was up the first time, with the van, and that you've been interfering with fate?" I speculated, distracting myself.

"That wasn't the first time," he said, and his voice was hard to hear. I stared at him in amazement, but he was looking down. "Your number was up the first time I met you."

I felt a spasm of fear at his words, and the abrupt memory of his violent black glare that first day… but the overwhelming sense of safety I felt in his presence

stifled it. By the time he looked up to read my eyes, there was no trace of fear in them.

"You remember?" he asked, his angel's face grave.

"Yes." I was calm.

"And yet here you sit." There was a trace of disbelief in his voice; he raised one eyebrow.

"Yes, here I sit... because of you." I paused. "Because somehow you knew how to find me today... ?" I prompted.

He pressed his lips together, staring at me through narrowed eyes, deciding again. His eyes flashed down to my full plate, and then back to me.

"You eat, I'll talk," he bargained.

I quickly scooped up another ravioli and popped it in my mouth.

"It's harder than it should be — keeping track of you. Usually I can find someone very easily, once I've heard their mind before." He looked at me anxiously, and I realized I had frozen. I made myself swallow, then stabbed another ravioli and tossed it in.

"I was keeping tabs on Jessica, not carefully — like I said, only you could find trouble in Port Angeles — and at first I didn't notice when you took off on your own. Then, when I realized that you weren't with her anymore, I went looking for you at the bookstore I saw in her head. I could tell that you hadn't gone in, and that you'd gone south... and I knew you would have to turn around soon. So I was just waiting for

you, randomly searching through the thoughts of people on the street — to see if anyone had noticed you so I would know where you were. I had no reason to be worried... but I was strangely anxious..." He was lost in thought, staring past me, seeing things I couldn't imagine.

"I started to drive in circles, still... listening. The sun was finally setting, and I was about to get out and follow you on foot. And then —" He stopped, clenching his teeth together in sudden fury. He made an effort to calm himself.

"Then what?" I whispered. He continued to stare over my head.

"I heard what they were thinking," he growled, his upper lip curling slightly back over his teeth. "I saw your face in his mind." He suddenly leaned forward, one elbow appearing on the table, his hand covering his eyes. The movement was so swift it startled me.

"It was very... hard — you can't imagine how hard — for me to simply take you away, and leave them... alive." His voice was muffled by his arm. "I could have let you go with Jessica and Angela, but I was afraid if you left me alone, I would go looking for them," he admitted in a whisper. I sat quietly, dazed, my thoughts incoherent. My hands were folded in my lap, and I was leaning weakly against the back of the seat. He still had his face in his hand, and he was as still as if he'd been carved from the stone his skin resembled.

Finally he looked up, his eyes seeking mine, full of his own questions.

"Are you ready to go home?" he asked.

"I'm ready to leave," I qualified, overly grateful that we had the hour-long ride home together. I wasn't ready to say goodbye to him. The waitress appeared as if she'd been called. Or watching.

"How are we doing?" she asked Edward.

"We're ready for the check, thank you." His voice was quiet, rougher, still reflecting the strain of our conversation. It seemed to muddle her. He looked up, waiting.

"S-sure," she stuttered. "Here you go." She pulled a small leather folder from the front pocket of her black apron and handed it to him. There was a bill in his hand already. He slipped it into the folder and handed it right back to her.

"No change." He smiled. Then he stood up, and I scrambled awkwardly to my feet.

She smiled invitingly at him again. "You have a nice evening." He didn't look away from me as he thanked her. I suppressed a smile. He walked close beside me to the door, still careful not to touch me. I remembered what Jessica had said about her relationship with Mike, how they were almost to the first-kiss stage. I sighed. Edward seemed to hear me, and he looked down curiously. I looked at the sidewalk, grateful that he didn't seem to be able to know what I was thinking.

He opened the passenger door, holding it for me as I stepped in, shutting it softly behind me. I watched

him walk around the front of the car, amazed, yet again, by how graceful he was. I probably should have been used to that by now — but I wasn't. I had a feeling Edward wasn't the kind of person anyone got used to.

Once inside the car, he started the engine and turned the heater on high. It had gotten very cold, and I guessed the good weather was at an end. I was warm in his jacket, though, breathing in the scent of it when I thought he couldn't see.

Edward pulled out through the traffic, apparently without a glance, flipping around to head toward the freeway.

"Now," he said significantly, "it's your turn."

# Chapter 9

## THEORY

"Can I ask just one more?" I pleaded as Edward accelerated much too quickly down the quiet street. He didn't seem to be paying any attention to the road.

He sighed.

"One," he agreed. His lips pressed together into a cautious line.

"Well… you said you knew I hadn't gone into the bookstore, and that I had gone south. I was just wondering how you knew that." He looked away, deliberating.

"I thought we were past all the evasiveness," I grumbled. He almost smiled.

"Fine, then. I followed your scent." He looked at the road, giving me time to compose my face. I couldn't think of an acceptable response to that, but I filed it carefully away for future study. I tried to refocus. I wasn't ready to let him be finished, now that he was finally explaining things.

"And then you didn't answer one of my first questions…" I stalled. He looked at me with disapproval. "Which one?"

"How does it work — the mind-reading thing? Can you read anybody's mind, anywhere? How do you do it? Can the rest of your family… ?" I felt silly, asking for clarification on make-believe.

"That's more than one," he pointed out. I simply intertwined my fingers and gazed at him, waiting.

"No, it's just me. And I can't hear anyone, anywhere. I have to be fairly close. The more familiar someone's… 'voice' is, the farther away I can hear them. But still, no more than a few miles." He paused thoughtfully.

"It's a little like being in a huge hall filled with people, everyone talking at once. It's just a hum — a buzzing of voices in the background. Until I focus on one voice, and then what they're thinking is clear.

"Most of the time I tune it all out — it can be very distracting. And then it's easier to seem normal" — he frowned as he said the word — "when I'm not accidentally answering someone's thoughts rather than their words."

"Why do you think you can't hear me?" I asked curiously. He looked at me, his eyes enigmatic.

"I don't know," he murmured. "The only guess I have is that maybe your mind doesn't work the same way the rest of theirs do. Like your thoughts are on the AM frequency and I'm only getting FM." He grinned at me, suddenly amused.

"My mind doesn't work right? I'm a freak?" The words bothered me more than they should — probably because his speculation hit home. I'd always suspected as much, and it embarrassed me to have it confirmed.

"I hear voices in my mind and you're worried that you're the freak," he laughed. "Don't worry, it's just a

theory..." His face tightened. "Which brings us back to you."

I sighed. How to begin?

"Aren't we past all the evasions now?" he reminded me softly. I looked away from his face for the first time, trying to find words. I happened to notice the speedometer.

"Holy crow!" I shouted. "Slow down!"

"What's wrong?" He was startled. But the car didn't decelerate.

"You're going a hundred miles an hour!" I was still shouting. I shot a panicky glance out the window, but it was too dark to see much. The road was only visible in the long patch of bluish brightness from the headlights. The forest along both sides of the road was like a black wall

— as hard as a wall of steel if we veered off the road at this speed.

"Relax, Bella." He rolled his eyes, still not slowing.

"Are you trying to kill us?" I demanded.

"We're not going to crash."

I tried to modulate my voice. "Why are you in such a hurry?"

"I always drive like this." He turned to smile crookedly at me.

"Keep your eyes on the road!"

"I've never been in an accident, Bella — I've never even gotten a ticket." He grinned and tapped his forehead. "Built-in radar detector."

"Very funny." I fumed. "Charlie's a cop, remember? I was raised to abide by traffic laws. Besides, if you turn us into a Volvo pretzel around a tree trunk, you can probably just walk away."

"Probably," he agreed with a short, hard laugh. "But you can't." He sighed, and I watched with relief as the needle gradually drifted toward eighty. "Happy?"

"Almost."

"I hate driving slow," he muttered.

"This is slow?"

"Enough commentary on my driving," he snapped. "I'm still waiting for your latest theory."

I bit my lip. He looked down at me, his honey eyes unexpectedly gentle.

"I won't laugh," he promised.

"I'm more afraid that you'll be angry with me."

"Is it that bad?"

"Pretty much, yeah."

He waited. I was looking down at my hands, so I couldn't see his expression.

"Go ahead." His voice was calm.

"I don't know how to start," I admitted.

"Why don't you start at the beginning... you said you didn't come up with this on your own."

"No."

"What got you started — a book? A movie?" he probed.

"No — it was Saturday, at the beach." I risked a glance up at his face. He looked puzzled.

"I ran into an old family friend —Jacob Black," I continued. "His dad and Charlie have been friends since I was a baby."

He still looked confused.

"His dad is one of the Quileute elders." I watched him carefully. His confused expression froze in place. "We went for a walk —" I edited all my scheming out of the story "— and he was telling me some old legends —

trying to scare me, I think. He told me one..." I hesitated.

"Go on," he said.

"About vampires." I realized I was whispering. I couldn't look at his face now. But I saw his knuckles tighten convulsively on the wheel.

"And you immediately thought of me?" Still calm.

"No. He... mentioned your family."

He was silent, staring at the road.

I was worried suddenly, worried about protecting Jacob.

"He just thought it was a silly superstition," I said quickly. "He didn't expect me to think anything of it." It didn't seem like enough; I had to confess. "It was my fault, I forced him to tell me."

"Why?"

"Lauren said something about you — she was trying to provoke me. And an older boy from the tribe said your family didn't come to the reservation, only it sounded like he meant something different. So I got Jacob alone and I tricked it out of him," I admitted, hanging my head. He startled me by laughing. I glared up at him. He was laughing, but his eyes were fierce, staring ahead.

"Tricked him how?" he asked.

"I tried to flirt — it worked better than I thought it would." Disbelief colored my tone as I remembered.

"I'd like to have seen that." He chuckled darkly. "And you accused me of dazzling people — poor Jacob Black."

I blushed and looked out my window into the night.

"What did you do then?" he asked after a minute.

"I did some research on the Internet."

"And did that convince you?" His voice sounded barely interested. But his hands were clamped hard onto the steering wheel.

"No. Nothing fit. Most of it was kind of silly. And then…" I stopped.

"What?"

"I decided it didn't matter," I whispered.

"It didn't matter?" His tone made me look up — I had finally broken through his carefully composed mask. His face was incredulous, with just a hint of the anger I'd feared.

"No," I said softly. "It doesn't matter to me what you are." A hard, mocking edge entered his voice. "You don't care if I'm a monster?

If I'm not human!"

"No."

He was silent, staring straight ahead again. His face was bleak and cold.

"You're angry," I sighed. "I shouldn't have said anything."

"No," he said, but his tone was as hard as his face. "I'd rather know what you're thinking — even if what you're thinking is insane."

"So I'm wrong again?" I challenged.

"That's not what I was referring to. 'It doesn't matter'!" he quoted, gritting his teeth together.

"I'm right?" I gasped.

"Does it matter?"

I took a deep breath.

"Not really." I paused. "But I am curious." My voice, at least, was composed.

He was suddenly resigned. "What are you curious about?"

"How old are you?"

"Seventeen," he answered promptly.

"And how long have you been seventeen?"

His lips twitched as he stared at the road. "A while," he admitted at last.

"Okay." I smiled, pleased that he was still being honest with me. He stared down at me with watchful eyes, much as he had before, when he was worried I would go into shock. I smiled wider in encouragement, and he frowned.

"Don't laugh — but how can you come out during the daytime?" He laughed anyway. "Myth."

"Burned by the sun?"

"Myth."

"Sleeping in coffins?"

"Myth." He hesitated for a moment, and a peculiar tone entered his voice.

"I can't sleep."

It took me a minute to absorb that. "At all?"

"Never," he said, his voice nearly inaudible. He turned to look at me with a wistful expression. The golden

eyes held mine, and I lost my train of thought. I stared at him until he looked away.

"You haven't asked me the most important question yet." His voice was hard now, and when he looked at me again his eyes were cold. I blinked, still dazed. "Which one is that?"

"You aren't concerned about my diet?" he asked sarcastically.

"Oh," I murmured, "that."

"Yes, that." His voice was bleak. "Don't you want to know if I drink blood?"

I flinched. "Well, Jacob said something about that."

"What did Jacob say?" he asked flatly.

"He said you didn't... hunt people. He said your family wasn't supposed to be dangerous because you only hunted animals."

"He said we weren't dangerous?" His voice was deeply skeptical.

"Not exactly. He said you weren't supposed to be dangerous. But the Quileutes still didn't want you on their land, just in case." He looked forward, but I couldn't tell if he was watching the road or not.

"So was he right? About not hunting people?" I tried to keep my voice as even as possible.

"The Quileutes have a long memory," he whispered. I took it as a confirmation.

"Don't let that make you complacent, though," he warned me. "They're right to keep their distance from us. We are still dangerous."

"I don't understand."

"We try," he explained slowly. "We're usually very good at what we do. Sometimes we make mistakes. Me, for example, allowing myself to be alone with you."

"This is a mistake?" I heard the sadness in my voice, but I didn't know if he could as well.

"A very dangerous one," he murmured.

We were both silent then. I watched the headlights twist with the curves of the road. They moved too fast; it didn't look real, it looked like a video game. I was aware of the time slipping away so quickly, like the black road beneath us, and I was hideously afraid that I would never have another chance to be with him like this again — openly, the walls between us gone for once. His words hinted at an end, and I recoiled from the idea. I couldn't waste one minute I had with him.

"Tell me more," I asked desperately, not caring what he said, just so I could hear his voice again.

He looked at me quickly, startled by the change in my tone. "What more do you want to know?"

"Tell me why you hunt animals instead of people," I suggested, my voice still tinged with desperation. I realized my eyes were wet, and I fought against the grief that was trying to overpower me.

"I don't want to be a monster." His voice was very low.

"But animals aren't enough?"

He paused. "I can't be sure, of course, but I'd compare it to living on tofu and soy milk; we call ourselves vegetarians, our little inside joke. It doesn't completely satiate the hunger — or rather thirst. But it keens us strong enough to resist. Most of the time." His tone turned ominous.

"Sometimes it's more difficult than others."

"Is it very difficult for you now?" I asked.

He sighed. "Yes."

"But you're not hungry now," I said confidently — stating, not asking.

"Why do you think that?"

"Your eyes. I told you I had a theory. I've noticed that people — men in particular — are crabbier when they're hungry."

He chuckled. "You are observant, aren't you?"

I didn't answer; I just listened to the sound of his laugh, committing it to memory.

"Were you hunting this weekend, with Emmett?" I asked when it was quiet again.

"Yes." He paused for a second, as if deciding whether or not to say something. "I didn't want to leave, but it was necessary. It's a bit easier to be around you when I'm not thirsty."

"Why didn't you want to leave?"

"It makes me… anxious… to be away from you." His eyes were gentle but intense, and they seemed to be making my bones turn soft. "I wasn't joking when I asked you to try not to fall in the ocean or get run over last Thursday. I was distracted all weekend, worrying about you. And after what happened tonight, I'm surprised that you did make it through a whole weekend unscathed." He shook his head, and then seemed to remember something. "Well, not totally unscathed."

"What?"

"Your hands," he reminded me. I looked down at my palms, at the almost-healed scrapes across the heels of my hands. His eyes missed nothing.

"I fell," I sighed.

"That's what I thought." His lips curved up at the corners. "I suppose, being you, it could have been much worse — and that possibility tormented me the entire time I was away. It was a very long three days. I really got on Emmett's nerves." He smiled ruefully at me.

"Three days? Didn't you just get back today?"

"No, we got back Sunday."

"Then why weren't any of you in school?" I was frustrated, almost angry as I thought of how much disappointment I had suffered because of his absence.

"Well, you asked if the sun hurt me, and it doesn't. But I can't go out in the sunlight — at least, not where anyone can see."

"Why?"

"I'll show you sometime," he promised.

I thought about it for a moment.

"You might have called me," I decided.

He was puzzled. "But I knew you were safe."

"But I didn't know where you were. I —" I hesitated, dropping my eyes.

"What?" His velvety voice was compelling.

"I didn't like it. Not seeing you. It makes me anxious, too." I blushed to be saying this out loud.

He was quiet. I glanced up, apprehensive, and saw that his expression was pained.

"Ah," he groaned quietly. "This is wrong." I couldn't understand his response. "What did I say?"

"Don't you see, Bella? It's one thing for me to make myself miserable, but a wholly other thing for you to be so involved." He turned his anguished eyes to the road, his words flowing almost too fast for me to understand. "I don't want to hear that you feel that way." His voice was low but urgent. His words cut me. "It's wrong. It's not safe. I'm dangerous, Bella — please, grasp that."

"No." I tried very hard not to look like a sulky child.

"I'm serious," he growled.

"So am I. I told you, it doesn't matter what you are. It's too late." His voice whipped out, low and harsh. "Never say that." I bit my lip and was glad he couldn't know how much that hurt. I stared out at the road. We must be close now. He was driving much too fast.

"What are you thinking?" he asked, his voice still raw. I just shook my head, not sure if I could speak. I could feel his gaze on my face, but I kept my eyes forward.

"Are you crying?" He sounded appalled. I hadn't realized the moisture in my eyes had brimmed over. I quickly rubbed my hand across my cheek, and sure enough, traitor tears were there, betraying me.

"No," I said, but my voice cracked.

I saw him reach toward me hesitantly with his right hand, but then he stopped and placed it slowly back on the steering wheel.

"I'm sorry." His voice burned with regret. I knew he wasn't just apologizing for the words that had upset me.

The darkness slipped by us in silence.

"Tell me something," he asked after another minute, and I could hear him struggle to use a lighter tone.

"Yes?"

"What were you thinking tonight, just before I came around the corner? I couldn't understand your

expression — you didn't look that scared, you looked like you were concentrating very hard on something."

"I was trying to remember how to incapacitate an attacker — you know, self-defense. I was going to smash his nose into his brain." I thought of the dark-haired man with a surge of hate.

"You were going to fight them?" This upset him. "Didn't you think about running?"

"I fall down a lot when I run," I admitted.

"What about screaming for help?"

"I was getting to that part."

He shook his head. "You were right — I'm definitely fighting fate trying to keep you alive."

I sighed. We were slowing, passing into the boundaries of Forks. It had taken less than twenty minutes.

"Will I see you tomorrow?" I demanded.

"Yes — I have a paper due, too." He smiled. "I'll save you a seat at lunch."

It was silly, after everything we'd been through tonight, how that little promise sent flutters through my stomach, and made me unable to speak. We were in front of Charlie's house. The lights were on, my truck in its place, everything utterly normal. It was like waking from a dream. He stopped the car, but I didn't move.

"Do you promise to be there tomorrow?"

"I promise."

I considered that for a moment, then nodded. I pulled his jacket off, taking one last whiff.

"You can keep it — you don't have a jacket for tomorrow," he reminded me. I handed it back to him. "I don't want to have to explain to Charlie."

"Oh, right." He grinned.

I hesitated, my hand on the door handle, trying to prolong the moment.

"Bella?" he asked in a different tone — serious, but hesitant.

"Yes?" I turned back to him too eagerly.

"Will you promise me something?"

"Yes," I said, and instantly regretted my unconditional agreement. What if he asked me to stay away from him? I couldn't keep that promise.

"Don't go into the woods alone."

I stared at him in blank confusion. "Why?"

He frowned, and his eyes were tight as he stared past me out the window.

"I'm not always the most dangerous thing out there. Let's leave it at that."

I shuddered slightly at the sudden bleakness in his voice, but I was relieved. This, at least, was an easy promise to honor. "Whatever you say."

"I'll see you tomorrow," he sighed, and I knew he wanted me to leave now.

"Tomorrow, then." I opened the door unwillingly.

"Bella?" I turned and he was leaning toward me, his pale, glorious face just inches from mine. My heart stopped beating.

"Sleep well," he said. His breath blew in my face, stunning me. It was the same exquisite scent that clung to his jacket, but in a more concentrated form. I blinked, thoroughly dazed. He leaned away. I was unable to move until my brain had somewhat unscrambled itself. Then I stepped out of the car awkwardly, having to use the frame for support. I thought I heard him chuckle, but the sound was too quiet for me to be certain.

He waited till I had stumbled to the front door, and then I heard his engine quietly rev. I turned to watch the silver car disappear around the corner. I realized it was very cold.

I reached for the key mechanically, unlocked the door, and stepped inside. Charlie called from the living room. "Bella?"

"Yeah, Dad, it's me." I walked in to see him. He was watching a baseball game.

"You're home early."

"Am I?" I was surprised.

"It's not even eight yet," he told me. "Did you girls have fun?"

"Yeah — it was lots of fun." My head was spinning as I tried to remember all the way back to the girls' night out I had planned. "They both found dresses."

"Are you all right?"

"I'm just tired. I did a lot of walking."

"Well, maybe you should go lie down." He sounded concerned. I wondered what my face looked like.

"I'm just going to call Jessica first."

"Weren't you just with her?" he asked, surprised.

"Yes — but I left my jacket in her car. I want to make sure she brings it tomorrow."

"Well, give her a chance to get home first."

"Right," I agreed.

I went to the kitchen and fell, exhausted, into a chair. I was really feeling dizzy now. I wondered if I was going to go into shock after all. Get a grip, I told myself.

The phone rang suddenly, startling me. I yanked it off the hook.

"Hello?" I asked breathlessly.

"Bella?"

"Hey, Jess, I was just going to call you."

"You made it home?" Her voice was relieved... and surprised.

"Yes. I left my jacket in your car — could you bring it to me tomorrow?"

"Sure. But tell me what happened!" she demanded.

"Um, tomorrow — in Trig, okay?"

She caught on quickly. "Oh, is your dad there?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Okay, I'll talk to you tomorrow, then. Bye!" I could hear the impatience in her voice.

"Bye, Jess."

I walked up the stairs slowly, a heavy stupor clouding my mind. I went through the motions of getting ready for bed without paying any attention to what I was doing. It wasn't until I was in the shower — the water too hot, burning my skin — that I realized I was freezing. I shuddered violently for several minutes before the steaming spray could finally relax my rigid muscles. Then I stood in the shower, too tired to move, until the hot water began to run out.

I stumbled out, wrapping myself securely in a towel, trying to hold the heat from the water in so the aching shivers wouldn't return. I dressed for bed swiftly and climbed under my quilt, curling into a ball, hugging myself to keep warm. A few small shudders trembled through me. My mind still swirled dizzily, full of images I couldn't understand, and some I fought to repress. Nothing seemed clear at first, but as I fell gradually closer to unconsciousness, a few certainties became evident. About three things I was absolutely positive. First, Edward was a vampire. Second, there

was part of him — and I didn't know how potent that part might be — that thirsted for my blood. And third, I was unconditionally and irrevocably in love with him.

# Chapter 10

## INTERROGATIONS

It was very hard, in the morning, to argue with the part of me that was sure last night was a dream. Logic wasn't on my side, or common sense. I clung to the parts I couldn't have imagined — like his smell. I was sure I could never have dreamed that up on my own.

It was foggy and dark outside my window, absolutely perfect. He had no reason not to be in school today. I dressed in my heavy clothes, remembering I didn't have a jacket. Further proof that my memory was real. When I got downstairs, Charlie was gone again — I was running later than I'd realized. I swallowed a granola bar in three bites, chased it down with milk straight from the carton, and then hurried out the door. Hopefully the rain would hold off until I could find Jessica. It was unusually foggy; the air was almost smoky with it. The mist was ice cold where it clung to the exposed skin on my face and neck. I couldn't wait to get the heat going in my truck. It was such a thick fog that I was a few feet down the driveway before I realized there was a car in it: a silver car. My heart thudded, stuttered, and then picked up again in double time.

I didn't see where he came from, but suddenly he was there, pulling the door open for me.

"Do you want to ride with me today?" he asked, amused by my expression as he caught me by surprise yet again. There was uncertainty in his voice.

He was really giving me a choice — I was free to refuse, and part of him hoped for that. It was a vain hope.

"Yes, thank you," I said, trying to keep my voice calm. As I stepped into the warm car, I noticed his tan jacket was slung over the headrest of the passenger seat. The door closed behind me, and, sooner than should be possible, he was sitting next to me, starting the car.

"I brought the jacket for you. I didn't want you to get sick or something." His voice was guarded. I noticed that he wore no jacket himself, just a light gray knit V-neck shirt with long sleeves. Again, the fabric clung to his perfectly muscled chest. It was a colossal tribute to his face that it kept my eyes away from his body.

"I'm not quite that delicate," I said, but I pulled the jacket onto my lap, pushing my arms through the too-long sleeves, curious to see if the scent could possibly be as good as I remembered. It was better.

"Aren't you?" he contradicted in a voice so low I wasn't sure if he meant for me to hear.

We drove through the fog-shrouded streets, always too fast, feeling awkward. I was, at least. Last night all the walls were down… almost all. I didn't know if we were still being as candid today. It left me tongue-tied. I waited for him to speak.

He turned to smirk at me. "What, no twenty questions today?"

"Do my questions bother you?" I asked, relieved.

"Not as much as your reactions do." He looked like he was joking, but I couldn't be sure.

I frowned. "Do I react badly?"

"No, that's the problem. You take everything so coolly — it's unnatural. It makes me wonder what you're really thinking."

"I always tell you what I'm really thinking."

"You edit," he accused.

"Not very much."

"Enough to drive me insane."

"You don't want to hear it," I mumbled, almost whispered. As soon as the words were out, I regretted them. The pain in my voice was very faint; I could only hope he hadn't noticed it.

He didn't respond, and I wondered if I had ruined the mood. His face was unreadable as we drove into the school parking lot. Something occurred to me belatedly.

"Where's the rest of your family?" I asked — more than glad to be alone with him, but remembering that his car was usually full.

"They took Rosalie's car." He shrugged as he parked next to a glossy red convertible with the top up. "Ostentatious, isn't it?"

"Um, wow," I breathed. "If she has that, why does she ride with you?"

"Like I said, it's ostentatious. We try to blend in."

"You don't succeed." I laughed and shook my head as we got out of the car. I wasn't late anymore; his lunatic driving had gotten me to school in plenty of time. "So why did Rosalie drive today if it's more conspicuous?"

"Hadn't you noticed? I'm breaking all the rules now." He met me at the front of the car, staying very close to my side as we walked onto campus. I wanted to close that little distance, to reach out and touch him, but I was afraid he wouldn't like me to.

"Why do you have cars like that at all?" I wondered aloud. "If you're looking for privacy?"

"An indulgence," he admitted with an impish smile. "We all like to drive fast."

"Figures," I muttered under my breath.

Under the shelter of the cafeteria roof's overhang, Jessica was waiting, her eyes about to bug out of their sockets. Over her arm, bless her, was my jacket.

"Hey, Jessica," I said when we were a few feet away. "Thanks for remembering." She handed me my jacket without speaking.

"Good morning, Jessica," Edward said politely. It wasn't really his fault that his voice was so irresistible. Or what his eyes were capable of.

"Er… hi." She shifted her wide eyes to me, trying to gather her jumbled thoughts. "I guess I'll see you in Trig." She gave me a meaningful look, and I suppressed a sigh. What on earth was I going to tell her?

"Yeah, I'll see you then."

She walked away, pausing twice to peek back over her shoulder at us.

"What are you going to tell her?" Edward murmured.

"Hey, I thought you couldn't read my mind!" I hissed.

"I can't," he said, startled. Then understanding brightened his eyes.

"However, I can read hers — she'll be waiting to ambush you in class." I groaned as I pulled off his jacket and handed it to him, replacing it with my own. He folded it over his arm.

"So what are you going to tell her?"

"A little help?" I pleaded. "What does she want to know?" He shook his head, grinning wickedly. "That's not fair."

"No, you not sharing what you know — now that's not fair." He deliberated for a moment as we walked. We stopped outside the door to my first class.

"She wants to know if we're secretly dating. And she wants to know how you feel about me," he finally said.

"Yikes. What should I say?" I tried to keep my expression very innocent. People were passing us on their way to class, probably staring, but I was barely aware of them.

"Hmmm." He paused to catch a stray lock of hair that was escaping the twist on my neck and wound it back into place. My heart spluttered hyperactively. "I suppose you could say yes to the first… if you don't mind — it's easier than any other explanation."

"I don't mind," I said in a faint voice.

"And as for her other question… well, I'll be listening to hear the answer to that one myself." One side of his mouth pulled up into my favorite uneven smile. I couldn't catch my breath soon enough to respond to that remark. He turned and walked away.

"I'll see you at lunch," he called over his shoulder. Three people walking in the door stopped to stare at me.

I hurried into class, flushed and irritated. He was such a cheater. Now I was even more worried about what I was going to say to Jessica. I sat in my usual seat, slamming my bag down in aggravation.

"Morning, Bella," Mike said from the seat next to me. I looked up to see an odd, almost resigned look on his face. "How was Port Angeles?"

"It was…" There was no honest way to sum it up. "Great," I finished lamely. "Jessica got a really cute dress."

"Did she say anything about Monday night?" he asked, his eyes brightening. I smiled at the turn the conversation had taken.

"She said she had a really good time," I assured him.

"She did?" he said eagerly.

"Most definitely."

Mr. Mason called the class to order then, asking us to turn in our papers. English and then Government passed in a blur, while I worried about how to explain things to Jessica and agonized over whether Edward would really be listening to what I said through the medium of Jess's thoughts. How very inconvenient his little talent could be — when it wasn't saving my life.

The fog had almost dissolved by the end of the second hour, but the day was still dark with low, oppressing clouds. I smiled up at the sky. Edward was right, of course. When I walked into Trig Jessica was sitting in the back row, nearly bouncing off her seat in agitation. I reluctantly went to sit by her, trying to convince myself it would be better to get it over with as soon as possible.

"Tell me everything!" she commanded before I was in the seat.

"What do you want to know?" I hedged.

"What happened last night?"

"He bought me dinner, and then he drove me home." She glared at me, her expression stiff with skepticism. "How did you get home so fast?"

"He drives like a maniac. It was terrifying." I hoped he heard that.

"Was it like a date — did you tell him to meet you there?" I hadn't thought of that. "No — I was very surprised to see him there." Her lips puckered in disappointment at the transparent honesty in my voice.

"But he picked you up for school today?" she probed.

"Yes — that was a surprise, too. He noticed I didn't have a jacket last night," I explained.

"So are you going out again?"

"He offered to drive me to Seattle Saturday because he thinks toy truck isn't up to it — does that count?"

"Yes." She nodded.

"Well, then, yes."

"W-o-w." She exaggerated the word into three syllables. "Edward Cullen."

"I know," I agreed. "Wow" didn't even cover it.

"Wait!" Her hands flew up, palms toward me like she was stopping traffic.

"Has he kissed you?"

"No," I mumbled. "It's not like that." She looked disappointed. I'm sure I did, too.

"Do you think Saturday... ?" She raised her eyebrows.

"I really doubt it." The discontent in my voice was poorly disguised.

"What did you talk about?" She pushed for more information in a whisper. Class had started but Mr. Varner wasn't paying close attention and we weren't the only ones still talking.

"I don't know, Jess, lots of stuff," I whispered back. "We talked about the English essay a little." A very, very little. I think he mentioned it in passing.

"Please, Bella," she begged. "Give me some details."

"Well... okay, I've got one. You should have seen the waitress flirting with him — it was over the top. But he didn't pay any attention to her at all." Let him make what he could of that.

"That's a good sign," she nodded. "Was she pretty?"

"Very — and probably nineteen or twenty."

"Even better. He must like you."

"I think so, but it's hard to tell. He's always so cryptic," I threw in for his benefit, sighing.

"I don't know how you're brave enough to be alone with him," she breathed.

"Why?" I was shocked, but she didn't understand my reaction.

"He's so... intimidating. I wouldn't know what to say to him." She made a face, probably remembering this

morning or last night, when he'd turned the overwhelming force of his eyes on her.

"I do have some trouble with incoherency when I'm around him," I admitted.

"Oh well. He is unbelievably gorgeous." Jessica shrugged as if this excused any flaws. Which, in her book, it probably did.

"There's a lot more to him than that."

"Really? Like what?"

I wished I had let it go. Almost as much as I was hoping he'd been kidding about listening in.

"I can't explain it right... but he's even more unbelievable behind the face." The vampire who wanted to be good — who ran around saving people's lives so he wouldn't be a monster... I stared toward the front of the room.

"Is that possible?" She giggled.

I ignored her, trying to look like I was paying attention to Mr. Varner.

"So you like him, then?" She wasn't about to give up.

"Yes," I said curtly.

"I mean, do you really like him?" she urged.

"Yes," I said again, blushing. I hoped that detail wouldn't register in her thoughts.

She'd had enough with the single syllable answers. "How much do you like him?"

"Too much," I whispered back. "More than he likes me. But I don't see how I can help that." I sighed, one blush blending into the next. Then, thankfully, Mr. Varner called on Jessica for an answer. She didn't get a chance to start on the subject again during class, and as soon as the bell rang, I took evasive action.

"In English, Mike asked me if you said anything about Monday night," I told her.

"You're kidding! What did you say?!" she gasped, completely sidetracked.

"I told him you said you had a lot of fun — he looked pleased."

"Tell me exactly what he said, and your exact answer!" We spent the rest of the walk dissecting sentence structures and most of Spanish on a minute description of Mike's facial expressions. I wouldn't have helped draw it out for as long as I did if I wasn't worried about the subject returning to me.

And then the bell rang for lunch. As I jumped up out of my seat, shoving my books roughly in my bag, my uplifted expression must have tipped Jessica off.

"You're not sitting with us today, are you?" she guessed.

"I don't think so." I couldn't be sure that he wouldn't disappear inconveniently again.

But outside the door to our Spanish class, leaning against the wall —

looking more like a Greek god than anyone had a right to — Edward was waiting for me. Jessica took one look, rolled her eyes, and departed.

"See you later, Bella." Her voice was thick with implications. I might have to turn off the ringer on the phone.

"Hello." His voice was amused and irritated at the same time. He had been listening, it was obvious.

"Hi."

I couldn't think of anything else to say, and he didn't speak — biding his time, I presumed — so it was a quiet walk to the cafeteria. Walking with Edward through the crowded lunchtime rush was a lot like my first day here; everyone stared.

He led the way into the line, still not speaking, though his eyes returned to my face every few seconds, their expression speculative. It seemed to me that irritation was winning out over amusement as the dominant emotion in his face. I fidgeted nervously with the zipper on my jacket.

He stepped up to the counter and filled a tray with food.

"What are you doing?" I objected. "You're not getting all that for me?" He shook his head, stepping forward to buy the food.

"Half is for me, of course."

I raised one eyebrow.

He led the way to the same place we'd sat that one time before. From the other end of the long table, a group of seniors gazed at us in amazement as we sat across from each other. Edward seemed oblivious.

"Take whatever you want," he said, pushing the tray toward me.

"I'm curious," I said as I picked up an apple, turning it around in my hands, "what would you do if someone dared you to eat food?"

"You're always curious." He grimaced, shaking his head. He glared at me, holding my eyes as he lifted the slice of pizza off the tray, and deliberately bit off a mouthful, chewed quickly, and then swallowed. I watched, eyes wide.

"If someone dared you to eat dirt, you could, couldn't you?" he asked condescendingly.

I wrinkled my nose. "I did once… on a dare," I admitted. "It wasn't so bad."

He laughed. "I suppose I'm not surprised." Something over my shoulder seemed to catch his attention.

"Jessica's analyzing everything I do — she'll break it down for you later." He pushed the rest of the pizza toward me. The mention of Jessica brought a hint of his former irritation back to his features. I put down the apple and took a bite of the pizza, looking away, knowing he was about to start.

"So the waitress was pretty, was she?" he asked casually.

"You really didn't notice?"

"No. I wasn't paying attention. I had a lot on my mind."

"Poor girl." I could afford to be generous now.

"Something you said to Jessica... well, it bothers me." He refused to be distracted. His voice was husky, and he glanced up from under his lashes with troubled eyes.

"I'm not surprised you heard something you didn't like. You know what they say about eavesdropners," I reminded him.

"I warned you I would be listening."

"And I warned you that you didn't want to know everything I was thinking."

"You did," he agreed, but his voice was still rough. "You aren't precisely right, though. I do want to know what you're thinking —

everything. I just wish... that you wouldn't be thinking some things." I scowled. "That's quite a distinction."

"But that's not really the point at the moment."

"Then what is?" We were inclined toward each other across the table now. He had his large white hands folded under his chin; I leaned forward, my right hand cupped around my neck. I had to remind myself that we were in a crowded lunchroom, with probably

many curious eyes on us. It was too easy to get wrapped up in our own private, tense little bubble.

"Do you truly believe that you care more for me than I do for you?" he murmured, leaning closer to me as he spoke, his dark golden eyes piercing. I tried to remember how to exhale. I had to look away before it came back to me.

"You're doing it again," I muttered.

His eyes opened wide with surprise. "What?"

"Dazzling me," I admitted, trying to concentrate as I looked back at him.

"Oh." He frowned.

"It's not your fault," I sighed. "You can't help it."

"Are you going to answer the question?"

I looked down. "Yes."

"Yes, you are going to answer, or yes, you really think that?" He was irritated again.

"Yes, I really think that." I kept my eyes down on the table, my eyes tracing the pattern of the faux wood grains printed on the laminate. The silence dragged on. I stubbornly refused to be the first to break it this time, fighting hard against the temptation to peek at his expression. Finally he spoke, voice velvet soft. "You're wrong." I glanced up to see that his eyes were gentle.

"You can't know that," I disagreed in a whisper. I shook my head in doubt, though my heart throbbed at his words and I wanted so badly to believe them.

"What makes you think so?" His liquid topaz eyes were penetrating —

trying futilely, I assumed, to lift the truth straight from my mind. I stared back, struggling to think clearly in spite of his face, to find some way to explain. As I searched for the words, I could see him getting impatient; frustrated by my silence, he started to scowl. I lifted my hand from my neck, and held up one finger.

"Let me think," I insisted. His expression cleared, now that he was satisfied that I was planning to answer. I dropped my hand to the table, moving my left hand so that my palms were pressed together. I stared at my hands, twisting and untwisting my fingers, as I finally spoke.

"Well, aside from the obvious, sometimes..." I hesitated. "I can't be sure

— I don't know how to read minds — but sometimes it seems like you're trying to say goodbye when you're saying something else." That was the best I could sum up the sensation of anguish that his words triggered in me at times.

"Perceptive," he whispered. And there was the anguish again, surfacing as he confirmed my fear. "That's exactly why you're wrong, though," he began to explain, but then his eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, 'the obvious'?"

"Well, look at me," I said, unnecessarily as he was already staring. "I'm absolutely ordinary — well, except for bad things like all the near-death experiences and being so clumsy that I'm almost disabled. And look at you." I waved my hand toward him and all his bewildering perfection. His brow creased angrily for a moment, then smoothed as his eyes took on a knowing look. "You don't see yourself very clearly, you know. I'll admit you're dead-on about the bad things," he chuckled blackly, "but you didn't hear what every human male in this school was thinking on your first day."

I blinked, astonished. "I don't believe it…" I mumbled to myself.

"Trust me just this once — you are the opposite of ordinary." My embarrassment was much stronger than my pleasure at the look that came into his eyes when he said this. I quickly reminded him of my original argument.

"But I'm not saying goodbye," I pointed out.

"Don't you see? That's what proves me right. I care the most, because if I can do it" — he shook his head, seeming to struggle with the thought —

"if leaving is the right thing to do, then I'll hurt myself to keep from hurting you, to keep you safe."

I glared. "And you don't think I would do the same?"

"You'd never have to make the choice."

Abruptly, his unpredictable mood shifted again; a mischievous, devastating smile rearranged his

features. "Of course, keeping you safe is beginning to feel like a full-time occupation that requires my constant presence."

"No one has tried to do away with me today," I reminded him, grateful for the lighter subject. I didn't want him to talk about goodbyes anymore. If I had to, I supposed I could purposefully put myself in danger to keep him close… I banished that thought before his quick eyes read it on my face. That idea would definitely get me in trouble.

"Yet," he added.

"Yet," I agreed; I would have argued, but now I wanted him to be expecting disasters.

"I have another question for you." His face was still casual.

"Shoot."

"Do you really need to go to Seattle this Saturday, or was that just an excuse to get out of saying no to all your admirers?" I made a face at the memory. "You know, I haven't forgiven you for the Tyler thing yet," I warned him. "It's your fault that he's deluded himself into thinking I'm going to prom with him."

"Oh, he would have found a chance to ask you without me — I just really wanted to watch your face," he chuckled, I would have been angrier if his laughter wasn't so fascinating. "If I'd asked you, would you have turned me down?" he asked, still laughing to himself.

"Probably not," I admitted. "But I would have canceled later — faked an illness or a sprained ankle."

He was puzzled. "Why would you do that?"

I shook my head sadly. "You've never seen me in Gym, I guess, but I would have thought you would understand."

"Are you referring to the fact that you can't walk across a flat, stable surface without finding something to trip over?"

"Obviously."

"That wouldn't be a problem." He was very confident. "It's all in the leading." He could see that I was about to protest, and he cut me off.

"But you never told me — are you resolved on going to Seattle, or do you mind if we do something different?"

As long as the "we" part was in, I didn't care about anything else.

"I'm open to alternatives," I allowed. "But I do have a favor to ask." He looked wary, as he always did when I asked an open-ended question.

"What?"

"Can I drive?"

He frowned. "Why?"

"Well, mostly because when I told Charlie I was going to Seattle, he specifically asked if I was going alone and, at the time, I was. If he asked again, I probably

wouldn't lie, but I don't think he will ask again, and leaving my truck at home would just bring up the subject unnecessarily. And also, because your driving frightens me." He rolled his eyes. "Of all the things about me that could frighten you, you worry about my driving." He shook his head in disgust, but then his eyes were serious again. "Won't you want to tell your father that you're spending the day with me?" There was an undercurrent to his question that I didn't understand.

"With Charlie, less is always more." I was definite about that. "Where are we going, anyway?"

"The weather will be nice, so I'll be staying out of the public eye... and you can stay with me, if you'd like to." Again, he was leaving the choice up to me.

"And you'll show me what you meant, about the sun?" I asked, excited by the idea of unraveling another of the unknowns.

"Yes." He smiled, and then paused. "But if you don't want to be... alone with me, I'd still rather you didn't go to Seattle by yourself. I shudder to think of the trouble you could find in a city that size." I was miffed. "Phoenix is three times bigger than Seattle — just in population. In physical size —"

"But apparently," he interrupted me, "your number wasn't up in Phoenix. So I'd rather you stayed near me." His eyes did that unfair smoldering thing again.

I couldn't argue, with the eyes or the motivation, and it was a moot point anyway. "As it happens, I don't mind being alone with you."

"I know," he sighed, brooding. "You should tell Charlie, though."

"Why in the world would I do that?"

His eyes were suddenly fierce. "To give me some small incentive to bring you back."

I gulped. But, after a moment of thought, I was sure. "I think I'll take my chances."

He exhaled angrily, and looked away.

"Let's talk about something else," I suggested.

"What do you want to talk about?" he asked. He was still annoyed. I glanced around us, making sure we were well out of anyone's hearing. As I cast my eyes around the room, I caught the eyes of his sister, Alice, staring at me. The others were looking at Edward. I looked away swiftly, back to him, and I. asked the first thing that came to mind.

"Why did you go to that Goat Rocks place last weekend... to hunt? Charlie said it wasn't a good place to hike, because of bears." He stared at me as if I was missing something very obvious.

"Bears?" I gasped, and he smirked. "You know, bears are not in season," I added sternly, to hide my shock.

"If you read carefully, the laws only cover hunting with weapons," he informed me.

He watched my face with enjoyment as that slowly sank in.

"Bears?" I repeated with difficulty.

"Grizzly is Emmett's favorite." His voice was still offhand, but his eyes were scrutinizing my reaction. I tried to pull myself together.

"Hmmm," I said, taking another bite of pizza as an excuse to look down. I chewed slowly, and then took a long drink of Coke without looking up.

"So," I said after a moment, finally meeting his now-anxious gaze.

"What's your favorite?"

He raised an eyebrow and the corners of his mouth turned down in disapproval. "Mountain lion."

"Ah," I said in a politely disinterested tone, looking for my soda again.

"Of course," he said, and his tone mirrored mine, "we have to be careful not to impact the environment with injudicious hunting. We try to focus on areas with an overpopulation of predators — ranging as far away as we need. There's always plenty of deer and elk here, and they'll do, but where's the fun in that?" He smiled teasingly.

"Where indeed," I murmured around another bite of pizza.

"Early spring is Emmett's favorite bear season — they're just coming out of hibernation, so they're more irritable." He smiled at some remembered joke.

"Nothing more fun than an irritated grizzly bear," I agreed, nodding. He snickered, shaking his head. "Tell me what you're really thinking, please."

"I'm trying to picture it — but I can't," I admitted. "How do you hunt a bear without weapons?"

"Oh, we have weapons." He flashed his bright teeth in a brief, threatening smile. I fought back a shiver before it could expose me.

"Just not the kind they consider when writing hunting laws. If you've ever seen a bear attack on television, you should be able to visualize Emmett hunting."

I couldn't stop the next shiver that flashed down my spine. I peeked across the cafeteria toward Emmett, grateful that he wasn't looking my way. The thick bands of muscle that wrapped his arms and torso were somehow even more menacing now.

Edward followed my gaze and chuckled. I stared at him, unnerved.

"Are you like a bear, too?" I asked in a low voice.

"More like the lion, or so they tell me," he said lightly. "Perhaps our preferences are indicative."

I tried to smile. "Perhaps," I repeated. But my mind was filled with opposing images that I couldn't merge together. "Is that something I might get to see?"

"Absolutely not!" His face turned even whiter than usual, and his eyes were suddenly furious. I leaned back, stunned and — though I'd never admit it to him — frightened by his reaction. He leaned back as well, folding his arms across his chest.

"Too scary for me?" I asked when I could control my voice again.

"If that were it, I would take you out tonight," he said, his voice cutting. "You need a healthy dose of fear. Nothing could be more beneficial for you."

"Then why?" I pressed, trying to ignore his angry expression. He glared at me for a long minute.

"Later," he finally said. He was on his feet in one lithe movement.

"We're going to be late."

I glanced around, startled to see that he was right and the cafeteria was nearly vacant. When I was with him, the time and the place were such a muddled blur that I completely lost track of both. I jumped up, grabbing my bag from the back of my chair.

"Later, then," I agreed. I wouldn't forget.

# Chapter 11

## COMPLICATIONS

Everyone watched us as we walked together to our lab table. I noticed that he no longer angled the chair to sit as far from me as the desk would allow. Instead, he sat quite close beside me, our arms almost touching.

Mr. Banner backed into the room then — what superb timing the man had —

pulling a tall metal frame on wheels that held a heavy-looking, outdated TV and VCR. A movie day — the lift in the class atmosphere was almost tangible.

Mr. Banner shoved the tape into the reluctant VCR and walked to the wall to turn off the lights.

And then, as the room went black, I was suddenly hyperaware that Edward was sitting less than an inch from me. I was stunned by the unexpected electricity that flowed through me, amazed that it was possible to be more aware of him than I already was. A crazy impulse to reach over and touch him, to stroke his perfect face just once in the darkness, nearly overwhelmed me. I crossed my arms tightly across my chest, my hands balling into fists. I was losing my mind.

The opening credits began, lighting the room by a token amount. My eyes, of their own accord, flickered to him. I smiled sheepishly as I realized his posture was identical to mine, fists clenched under his arms,

right down to the eyes, peering sideways at me. He grinned back, his eyes somehow managing to smolder, even in the dark. I looked away before I could start hyperventilating. It was absolutely ridiculous that I should feel dizzy.

The hour seemed very long. I couldn't concentrate on the movie — I didn't even know what subject it was on. I tried unsuccessfully to relax, but the electric current that seemed to be originating from somewhere in his body never slackened. Occasionally I would permit myself a quick glance in his direction, but he never seemed to relax, either. The overpowering craving to touch him also refused to fade, and I crushed my fists safely against my ribs until my fingers were aching with the effort. I breathed a sigh of relief when Mr. Banner flicked the lights back on at the end of class, and stretched my arms out in front of me, flexing my stiff fingers. Edward chuckled beside me.

"Well, that was interesting," he murmured. His voice was dark and his eyes were cautious.

"Umm," was all I was able to respond.

"Shall we?" he asked, rising fluidly.

I almost groaned. Time for Gym. I stood with care, worried my balance might have been affected by the strange new intensity between us. He walked me to my next class in silence and paused at the door; I turned to say goodbye. His face startled me — his expression was torn, almost pained, and so fiercely beautiful that the ache to touch him flared as strong as before. My goodbye stuck in my throat.

He raised his hand, hesitant, conflict raging in his eyes, and then swiftly brushed the length of my cheekbone with his fingertips. His skin was as icy as ever, but the trail his fingers left on my skin was alarmingly warm — like I'd been burned, but didn't feel the pain of it yet.

He turned without a word and strode quickly away from me. I walked into the gym, lightheaded and wobbly. I drifted to the locker room, changing in a trancelike state, only vaguely aware that there were other people surrounding me. Reality didn't fully set in until I was handed a racket. It wasn't heavy, yet it felt very unsafe in my hand. I could see a few of the other kids in class eyeing me furtively. Coach Clapp ordered us to pair up into teams.

Mercifully, some vestiges of Mike's chivalry still survived; he came to stand beside me.

"Do you want to be a team?"

"Thanks, Mike — you don't have to do this, you know." I grimaced apologetically.

"Don't worry, I'll keep out of your way." He grinned. Sometimes it was so easy to like Mike.

It didn't go smoothly. I somehow managed to hit myself in the head with my racket and clip Mike's shoulder on the same swing. I spent the rest of the hour in the back corner of the court, the racket held safely behind my back. Despite being handicapped by me, Mike was pretty good; he won three games out of four singlehandedly. He gave me an unearned high

five when the coach finally blew the whistle ending class.

"So," he said as we walked off the court.

"So what?"

"You and Cullen, huh?" he asked, his tone rebellious. My previous feeling of affection disappeared.

"That's none of your business, Mike," I warned, internally cursing Jessica straight to the fiery pits of Hades.

"I don't like it," he muttered anyway.

"You don't have to," I snapped.

"He looks at you like... like you're something to eat," he continued, ignoring me.

I choked back the hysteria that threatened to explode, but a small giggle managed to get out despite my efforts. He glowered at me. I waved and fled to the locker room.

I dressed quickly, something stronger than butterflies battering recklessly against the walls of my stomach, my argument with Mike already a distant memory. I was wondering if Edward would be waiting, or if I should meet him at his car. What if his family was there? I felt a wave of real terror. Did they know that I knew? Was I supposed to know that they knew that I knew, or not?

By the time I walked out of the gym, I had just about decided to walk straight home without even looking

toward the parking lot. But my worries were unnecessary. Edward was waiting, leaning casually against the side of the gym, his breathtaking face untroubled now. As I walked to his side, I felt a peculiar sense of release.

"Hi," I breathed, smiling hugely.

"Hello." His answering smile was brilliant. "How was Gym?" My face fell a tiny bit. "Fine," I lied.

"Really?" He was unconvinced. His eyes shifted their focus slightly, looking over my shoulder and narrowing. I glanced behind me to see Mike's back as he walked away.

"What?" I demanded.

His eyes slid back to mine, still tight. "Newton's getting on my nerves."

"You weren't listening again?" I was horror-struck. All traces of my sudden good humor vanished.

"How's your head?" he asked innocently.

"You're unbelievable!" I turned, stomping away in the general direction of the parking lot, though I hadn't ruled out walking at this point. He kept up with me easily.

"You were the one who mentioned how I'd never seen you in Gym — it made me curious." He didn't sound repentant, so I ignored him. We walked in silence — a furious, embarrassed silence on my part — to his car. But I had to stop a few steps away — a crowd of people, all boys, were surrounding it.

Then I realized they weren't surrounding the Volvo, they were actually circled around Rosalie's red convertible, unmistakable lust in their eyes. None of them even looked up as Edward slid between them to open his door. I climbed quickly in the passenger side, also unnoticed.

"Ostentatious," he muttered.

"What kind of car is that?" I asked.

"An M3."

"I don't speak Car and Driver."

"It's a BMW." He rolled his eyes, not looking at me, trying to back out without running over the car enthusiasts.

I nodded — I'd heard of that one.

"Are you still angry?" he asked as he carefully maneuvered his way out.

"Definitely."

He sighed. "Will you forgive me if I apologize?"

"Maybe… if you mean it. And if you promise not to do it again," I insisted.

His eyes were suddenly shrewd. "How about if I mean it, and I agree to let you drive Saturday?" he countered my conditions. I considered, and decided it was probably the best offer I would get.

"Deal," I agreed.

"Then I'm very sorry I upset you." His eyes burned with sincerity for a protracted moment — playing havoc with the rhythm of my heart — and then turned playful. "And I'll be on your doorstep bright and early Saturday morning."

"Um, it doesn't help with the Charlie situation if an unexplained Volvo is left in the driveway."

His smile was condescending now. "I wasn't intending to bring a car."

"How —"

He cut me off. "Don't worry about it. I'll be there, no car." I let it go. I had a more pressing question.

"Is it later yet?" I asked significantly.

He frowned. "I supposed it is later."

I kept my expression polite as I waited.

He stopped the car. I looked up, surprised — of course we were already at Charlie's house, parked behind the truck. It was easier to ride with him if I only looked when it was over. When I looked back at him, he was staring at me, measuring with his eyes.

"And you still want to know why you can't see me hunt?" He seemed solemn, but I thought I saw a trace of humor deep in his eyes.

"Well," I clarified, "I was mostly wondering about your reaction."

"Did I frighten you?" Yes, there was definitely humor there.

"No," I lied. He didn't buy it.

"I apologize for scaring you," he persisted with a slight smile, but then all evidence of teasing disappeared. "It was just the very thought of you being there… while we hunted." His jaw tightened.

"That would be bad?"

He spoke from between clenched teeth. "Extremely."

"Because… ?"

He took a deep breath and stared through the windshield at the thick, rolling clouds that seemed to press down, almost within reach.

"When we hunt," he spoke slowly, unwillingly, "we give ourselves over to our senses… govern less with our minds. Especially our sense of smell. If you were anywhere near me when I lost control that way…" He shook his head, still gazing morosely at the heavy clouds.

I kept my expression firmly under control, expecting the swift flash of his eyes to judge my reaction that soon followed. My face gave nothing away.

But our eyes held, and the silence deepened — and changed. Flickers of the electricity I'd felt this afternoon began to charge the atmosphere as he gazed unrelentingly into my eyes. It wasn't until my head started to swim that I realized I wasn't breathing. When I drew in a jagged breath, breaking the stillness, he closed his eyes.

"Bella, I think you should go inside now." His low voice was rough, his eyes on the clouds again.

I opened the door, and the arctic draft that burst into the car helped clear my head. Afraid I might stumble in my woozy state, I stepped carefully out of the car and shut the door behind me without looking back. The whir of the automatic window unrolling made me turn.

"Oh, Bella?" he called after me, his voice more even. He leaned toward the open window with a faint smile on his lips.

"Yes?"

"Tomorrow it's my turn."

"Your turn to what?"

He smiled wider, flashing his gleaming teeth. "Ask the questions." And then he was gone, the car speeding down the street and disappearing around the corner before I could even collect my thoughts. I smiled as I walked to the house. It was clear he was planning to see me tomorrow, if nothing else.

That night Edward starred in my dreams, as usual. However, the climate of my unconsciousness had changed. It thrilled with the same electricity that had charged the afternoon, and I tossed and turned restlessly, waking often. It was only in the early hours of the morning that I finally sank into an exhausted, dreamless sleep.

When I woke I was still tired, but edgy as well. I pulled on my brown turtleneck and the inescapable

jeans, sighing as I daydreamed of spaghetti straps and shorts. Breakfast was the usual, quiet event I expected. Charlie fried eggs for himself; I had my bowl of cereal. I wondered if he had forgotten about this Saturday. He answered my unspoken question as he stood up to take his plate to the sink.

"About this Saturday..." he began, walking across the kitchen and turning on the faucet.

I cringed. "Yes, Dad?"

"Are you still set on going to Seattle?" he asked.

"That was the plan." I grimaced, wishing he hadn't brought it up so I wouldn't have to compose careful half-truths.

He squeezed some dish soap onto his plate and swirled it around with the brush. "And you're sure you can't make it back in time for the dance?"

"I'm not going to the dance, Dad." I glared.

"Didn't anyone ask you?" he asked, trying to hide his concern by focusing on rinsing the plate.

I sidestepped the minefield. "It's a girl's choice."

"Oh." He frowned as he dried his plate.

I sympathized with him. It must be a hard thing, to be a father; living in fear that your daughter would meet a boy she liked, but also having to worry if she didn't. How ghastly it would be, I thought, shuddering, if Charlie had even the slightest inkling of exactly what I did like. Charlie left then, with a goodbye wave, and

I went upstairs to brush my teeth and gather my books. When I heard the cruiser pull away, I could only wait a few seconds before I had to peek out of my window. The silver car was already there, waiting in Charlie's spot on the driveway. I bounded down the stairs and out the front door, wondering how long this bizarre routine would continue. I never wanted it to end. He waited in the car, not appearing to watch as I shut the door behind me without bothering to lock the dead-bolt. I walked to the car, pausing shyly before opening the door and stepping in. He was smiling, relaxed —

and, as usual, perfect and beautiful to an excruciating degree.

"Good morning." His voice was silky. "How are you today?" His eyes roamed over my face, as if his question was something more than simple courtesy.

"Good, thank you." I was always good — much more than good — when I was near him.

His gaze lingered on the circles under my eyes. "You look tired."

"I couldn't sleep," I confessed, automatically swinging my hair around my shoulder to provide some measure of cover.

"Neither could I," he teased as he started the engine. I was becoming used to the quiet purr. I was sure the roar of my truck would scare me, whenever I got to drive it again.

I laughed. "I guess that's right. I suppose I slept just a little bit more than you did."

"I'd wager you did."

"So what did you do last night?" I asked.

He chuckled. "Not a chance. It's my day to ask questions."

"Oh, that's right. What do you want to know?" My forehead creased. I couldn't imagine anything about me that could be in any way interesting to him.

"What's your favorite color?" he asked, his face grave. I rolled my eyes. "It changes from day to day."

"What's your favorite color today?" He was still solemn.

"Probably brown." I tended to dress according to my mood. He snorted, dropping his serious expression. "Brown?" he asked skeptically.

"Sure. Brown is warm. I miss brown. Everything that's supposed to be brown — tree trunks, rocks, dirt — is all covered up with squashy green stuff here," I complained.

He seemed fascinated by my little rant. He considered for a moment, staring into my eyes.

"You're right," he decided, serious again. "Brown is warm." He reached over, swiftly, but somehow still hesitantly, to sweep my hair back behind my shoulder.

We were at the school by now. He turned back to me as he pulled into a parking space.

"What music is in your CD player right now?" he asked, his face as somber as if he'd asked for a murder confession.

I realized I'd never removed the CD Phil had given me. When I said the name of the band, he smiled crookedly, a peculiar expression in his eyes. He flipped open a compartment under his car's CD player, pulled out one of thirty or so CDs that were jammed into the small space, and handed it to me,

"Debussy to this?" He raised an eyebrow.

It was the same CD. I examined the familiar cover art, keeping my eyes down.

It continued like that for the rest of the day. While he walked me to English, when he met me after Spanish, all through the lunch hour, he questioned me relentlessly about every insignificant detail of my existence. Movies I'd liked and hated, the few places I'd been and the many places I wanted to go, and books — endlessly books.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd talked so much. More often than not, I felt self-conscious, certain I must be boring him. But the absolute absorption of his face, and his never-ending stream of questions, compelled me to continue. Mostly his questions were easy, only a very few triggering my easy blushes. But when I did flush, it brought on a whole new round of questions.

Such as the time he asked my favorite gemstone, and I blurted out topaz before thinking. He'd been flinging questions at me with such speed that I felt like I was taking one of those psychiatric tests where you answer with the first word that comes to mind. I was sure he would have continued down whatever mental list he was following, except for the blush. My face reddened because, until very recently, my favorite gemstone was garnet. It was impossible, while staring back into his topaz eyes, not to remember the reason for the switch. And, naturally, he wouldn't rest until I'd admitted why I was embarrassed.

"Tell me," he finally commanded after persuasion failed — failed only because I kept my eyes safely away from his face.

"It's the color of your eyes today," I sighed, surrendering, staring down at my hands as I fiddled with a piece of my hair. "I suppose if you asked me in two weeks I'd say onyx." I'd given more information than necessary in my unwilling honesty, and I worried it would provoke the strange anger that flared whenever I slipped and revealed too clearly how obsessed I was.

But his pause was very short.

"What kinds of flowers do you prefer?" he fired off. I sighed in relief, and continued with the psychoanalysis. Biology was a complication again. Edward had continued with his quizzing up until Mr. Banner entered the room, dragging the audiovisual frame again. As the teacher approached the light switch, I noticed Edward slide his chair slightly

farther away from mine. It didn't help. As soon as the room was dark, there was the same electric spark, the same restless craving to stretch my hand across the short space and touch his cold skin, as yesterday.

I leaned forward on the table, resting my chin on my folded arms, my hidden fingers gripping the table's edge as I fought to ignore the irrational longing that unsettled me. I didn't look at him, afraid that if he was looking at me, it would only make self-control that much harder. I sincerely tried to watch the movie, but at the end of the hour I had no idea what I'd just seen. I sighed in relief again when Mr. Banner turned the lights on, finally glancing at Edward; he was looking at me, his eyes ambivalent.

He rose in silence and then stood still, waiting for me. We walked toward the gym in silence, like yesterday. And, also like yesterday, he touched my face wordlessly — this time with the back of his cool hand, stroking once from my temple to my jaw — before he turned and walked away. Gym passed quickly as I watched Mike's one-man badminton show. He didn't speak to me today, either in response to my vacant expression or because he was still angry about our squabble yesterday. Somewhere, in a corner of my mind, I felt bad about that. But I couldn't concentrate on him. I hurried to change afterward, ill at ease, knowing the faster I moved, the sooner I would be with Edward. The pressure made me more clumsy than usual, but eventually I made it out the door, feeling the same release when I saw him standing there, a wide smile automatically spreading across my

face. He smiled in reaction before launching into more cross-examination.

His questions were different now, though, not as easily answered. He wanted to know what I missed about home, insisting on descriptions of anything he wasn't familiar with. We sat in front of Charlie's house for hours, as the sky darkened and rain plummeted around us in a sudden deluge.

I tried to describe impossible things like the scent of creosote —

bitter, slightly resinous, but still pleasant — the high, keening sound of the cicadas in July, the feathery barrenness of the trees, the very size of the sky, extending white-blue from horizon to horizon, barely interrupted by the low mountains covered with purple volcanic rock. The hardest thing to explain was why it was so beautiful to me — to justify a beauty that didn't depend on the sparse, spiny vegetation that often looked half dead, a beauty that had more to do with the exposed shape of the land, with the shallow bowls of valleys between the craggy hills, and the way they held on to the sun. I found myself using my hands as I tried to describe it to him.

His quiet, probing questions kept me talking freely, forgetting, in the dim light of the storm, to be embarrassed for monopolizing the conversation. Finally, when I had finished detailing my cluttered room at home, he paused instead of responding with another question.

"Are you finished?" I asked in relief.

"Not even close — but your father will be home soon."

"Charlie!" I suddenly recalled his existence, and sighed. I looked out at the rain-darkened sky, but it gave nothing away. "How late is it?" I wondered out loud as I glanced at the clock. I was surprised by the time

— Charlie would be driving home now.

"It's twilight," Edward murmured, looking at the western horizon, obscured as it was with clouds. His voice was thoughtful, as if his mind were somewhere far away. I stared at him as he gazed unseeingly out the windshield.

I was still staring when his eyes suddenly shifted back to mine.

"It's the safest time of day for us," he said, answering the unspoken question in my eyes. "The easiest time. But also the saddest, in a way...

the end of another day, the return of the night. Darkness is so predictable, don't you think?" He smiled wistfully.

"I like the night. Without the dark, we'd never see the stars." I frowned. "Not that you see them here much."

He laughed, and the mood abruptly lightened.

"Charlie will be here in a few minutes. So, unless you want to tell him that you'll be with me Saturday..." He raised one eyebrow.

"Thanks, but no thanks." I gathered my books, realizing I was stiff from sitting still so long. "So is it my turn tomorrow, then?"

"Certainly not!" His face was teasingly outraged. "I told you I wasn't done, didn't I?"

"What more is there?"

"You'll find out tomorrow." He reached across to open my door for me, and his sudden proximity sent my heart into frenzied palpitations. But his hand froze on the handle.

"Not good," he muttered.

"What is it?" I was surprised to see that his jaw was clenched, his eyes disturbed.

He glanced at me for a brief second. "Another complication," he said glumly.

He flung the door open in one swift movement, and then moved, almost cringed, swiftly away from me.

The flash of headlights through the rain caught my attention as a dark car pulled up to the curb just a few feet away, facing us.

"Charlie's around the corner," he warned, staring through the downpour at the other vehicle.

I hopped out at once, despite my confusion and curiosity. The rain was louder as it glanced off my jacket.

I tried to make out the shapes in the front seat of the other car, but it was too dark. I could see Edward

illuminated in the glare of the new car's headlights; he was still staring ahead, his gaze locked on something or someone I couldn't see. His expression was a strange mix of frustration and defiance.

Then he revved the engine, and the tires squealed against the wet pavement. The Volvo was out of sight in seconds.

"Hey, Bella," called a familiar, husky voice from the driver's side of the little black car.

"Jacob?" I asked, squinting through the rain. Just then, Charlie's cruiser swung around the corner, his lights shining on the occupants of the car in front of me.

Jacob was already climbing out, his wide grin visible even through the darkness. In the passenger seat was a much older man, a heavyset man with a memorable face — a face that overflowed, the cheeks resting against his shoulders, with creases running through the russet skin like an old leather jacket. And the surprisingly familiar eyes, black eyes that seemed at the same time both too young and too ancient for the broad face they were set in. Jacob's father, Billy Black. I knew him immediately, though in the more than five years since I'd seen him last I'd managed to forget his name when Charlie had spoken of him my first day here. He was staring at me, scrutinizing my face, so I smiled tentatively at him. His eyes were wide, as if in shock or fear, his nostrils flared. My smile faded.

Another complication, Edward had said.

Billy still stared at me with intense, anxious eyes. I groaned internally. Had Billy recognized Edward so easily? Could he really believe the impossible legends his son had scoffed at?

The answer was clear in Billy's eyes. Yes. Yes, he could.

# Chapter 12

## BALANCING

"Billy!" Charlie called as soon as he got out of the car. I turned toward the house, beckoning to Jacob as I ducked under the porch. I heard Charlie greeting them loudly behind me.

"I'm going to pretend I didn't see you behind the wheel, Jake," he said disapprovingly.

"We get permits early on the rez," Jacob said while I unlocked the door and flicked on the porch light.

"Sure you do," Charlie laughed.

"I have to get around somehow." I recognized Billy's resonant voice easily, despite the years. The sound of it made me feel suddenly younger, a child.

I went inside, leaving the door open behind me and turning on lights before I hung up my jacket. Then I stood in the door, watching anxiously as Charlie and Jacob helped Billy out of the car and into his wheelchair. I backed out of the way as the three of them hurried in, shaking off the rain.

"This is a surprise," Charlie was saying.

"It's been too long," Billy answered. "I hope it's not a bad time." His dark eyes flashed up to me again, their expression unreadable.

"No, it's great. I hope you can stay for the game." Jacob grinned. "I think that's the plan — our TV

broke last week." Billy made a face at his son. "And, of course, Jacob was anxious to see Bella again," he added. Jacob scowled and ducked his head while I fought back a surge of remorse. Maybe I'd been too convincing on the beach.

"Are you hungry?" I asked, turning toward the kitchen. I was eager to escape Billy's searching gaze.

"Naw, we ate just before we came," Jacob answered.

"How about you, Charlie?" I called over my shoulder as I fled around the corner.

"Sure," he replied, his voice moving in the direction of the front room and the TV. I could hear Billy's chair follow.

The grilled cheese sandwiches were in the frying pan and I was slicing up a tomato when I sensed someone behind me.

"So, how are things?" Jacob asked.

"Pretty good." I smiled. His enthusiasm was hard to resist. "How about you? Did you finish your car?"

"No." He frowned. "I still need parts. We borrowed that one." He pointed with his thumb in the direction of the front yard.

"Sorry. I haven't seen any... what was it you were looking for?"

"Master cylinder." He grinned. "Is something wrong with the truck?" he added suddenly.

"No."

"Oh. I just wondered because you weren't driving it." I stared down at the pan, pulling up the edge of a sandwich to check the bottom side. "I got a ride with a friend."

"Nice ride." Jacob's voice was admiring. "I didn't recognize the driver, though. I thought I knew most of the kids around here." I nodded noncommittally, keeping my eyes down as I flipped sandwiches.

"My dad seemed to know him from somewhere."

"Jacob, could you hand me some plates? They're in the cupboard over the sink."

"Sure."

He got the plates in silence. I hoped he would let it drop now.

"So who was it?" he asked, setting two plates on the counter next to me. I sighed in defeat. "Edward Cullen."

To my surprise, he laughed. I glanced up at him. He looked a little embarrassed.

"Guess that explains it, then," he said. "I wondered why my dad was acting so strange."

"That's right." I faked an innocent expression. "He doesn't like the Cullens."

"Superstitious old man," Jacob muttered under his breath.

"You don't think he'd say anything to Charlie?" I couldn't help asking, the words coming out in a low rush.

Jacob stared at me for a moment, and I couldn't read the expression in his dark eyes. "I doubt it," he finally answered. "I think Charlie chewed him out pretty good last time. They haven't spoken much since — tonight is sort of a reunion, I think. I don't think he'd bring it up again."

"Oh," I said, trying to sound indifferent.

I stayed in the front room after I carried the food out to Charlie, pretending to watch the game while Jacob chattered at me. I was really listening to the men's conversation, watching for any sign that Billy was about to rat me out, trying to think of ways to stop him if he began. It was a long night. I had a lot of homework that was going undone, but I was afraid to leave Billy alone with Charlie. Finally, the game ended.

"Are you and your friends coming back to the beach soon?" Jacob asked as he pushed his father over the lip of the threshold.

"I'm not sure," I hedged.

"That was fun, Charlie," Billy said.

"Come up for the next game," Charlie encouraged.

"Sure, sure," Billy said. "We'll be here. Have a good night." His eyes shifted to mine, and his smile disappeared. "You take care, Bella," he added seriously.

"Thanks," I muttered, looking away.

I headed for the stairs while Charlie waved from the doorway.

"Wait, Bella," he said.

I cringed. Had Billy gotten something in before I'd joined them in the living room?

But Charlie was relaxed, still grinning from the unexpected visit.

"I didn't get a chance to talk to you tonight. How was your day?"

"Good." I hesitated with one foot on the first stair, searching for details I could safely share. "My badminton team won all four games."

"Wow, I didn't know you could play badminton."

"Well, actually I can't, but my partner is really good," I admitted.

"Who is it?" he asked with token interest.

"Um... Mike Newton," I told him reluctantly.

"Oh yeah — you said you were friends with the Newton kid." He perked up.

"Nice family." He mused for a minute. "Why didn't you ask him to the dance this weekend?"

"Dad!" I groaned. "He's kind of dating my friend Jessica. Besides, you know I can't dance."

"Oh yeah," he muttered. Then he smiled at me apologetically. "So I guess it's good you'll be gone Saturday... I've made plans to go fishing with the guys from the station. The weather's supposed to be real warm. But if you wanted to put your trip off till someone could go with you, I'd stay home. I know I leave you here alone too much."

"Dad, you're doing a great job." I smiled, hoping my relief didn't show.

"I've never minded being alone — I'm too much like you." I winked at him, and he smiled his crinkly-eyed smile.

I slept better that night, too tired to dream again. When I woke to the pearl gray morning, my mood was blissful. The tense evening with Billy and Jacob seemed harmless enough now; I decided to forget it completely. I caught myself whistling while I was pulling the front part of my hair back into a barrette, and later again as I skipped down the stairs. Charlie noticed.

"You're cheerful this morning," he commented over breakfast. I shrugged. "It's Friday."

I hurried so I would be ready to go the second Charlie left. I had my bag ready, shoes on, teeth brushed, but even though I rushed to the door as soon as I was sure Charlie would be out of sight, Edward was faster. He was waiting in his shiny car, windows down, engine off.

I didn't hesitate this time, climbing in the passenger side quickly, the sooner to see his face. He grinned

his crooked smile at me, stopping my breath and my heart. I couldn't imagine how an angel could be any more glorious. There was nothing about him that could be improved upon.

"How did you sleep?" he asked. I wondered if he had any idea how appealing his voice was.

"Fine. How was your night?"

"Pleasant." His smile was amused; I felt like I was missing an inside joke.

"Can I ask what you did?" I asked.

"No." He grinned. "Today is still mine." He wanted to know about people today: more about Renée, her hobbies, what we'd done in our free time together. And then the one grandmother I'd known, my few school friends — embarrassing me when he asked about boys I'd dated. I was relieved that I'd never really dated anyone, so that particular conversation couldn't last long. He seemed as surprised as Jessica and Angela by my lack of romantic history.

"So you never met anyone you wanted?" he asked in a serious tone that made me wonder what he was thinking about.

I was grudgingly honest. "Not in Phoenix."

His lips pressed together into a hard line.

We were in the cafeteria at this point. The day had sped by in the blur that was rapidly becoming routine. I took advantage of his brief pause to take a bite of my bagel.

"I should have let you drive yourself today," he announced, apropos of nothing, while I chewed.

"Why?" I demanded.

"I'm leaving with Alice after lunch."

"Oh." I blinked, bewildered and disappointed. "That's okay, it's not that far of a walk."

He frowned at me impatiently. "I'm not going to make you walk home. We'll go get your truck and leave it here for you."

"I don't have my key with me," I sighed. "I really don't mind walking." What I minded was losing my time with him.

He shook his head. "Your truck will be here, and the key will be in the ignition — unless you're afraid someone might steal it." He laughed at the thought.

"All right," I agreed, pursing my lips. I was pretty sure my key was in the pocket of a pair of jeans I wore Wednesday, under a pile of clothes in the laundry room. Even if he broke into my house, or whatever he was planning, he'd never find it. He seemed to feel the challenge in my consent. He smirked, overconfident.

"So where are you going?" I asked as casually as I could manage.

"Hunting," he answered grimly. "If I'm going to be alone with you tomorrow, I'm going to take whatever precautions I can." His face grew morose… and pleading. "You can always cancel, you know." I looked down, afraid of the persuasive power of his eyes. I

refused to be convinced to fear him, no matter how real the danger might be. It doesn't matter, I repeated in my head.

"No," I whispered, glancing back at his face. "I can't."

"Perhaps you're right," he murmured bleakly. His eyes seemed to darken in color as I watched.

I changed the subject. "What time will I see you tomorrow?" I asked, already depressed by the thought of him leaving now.

"That depends… it's a Saturday, don't you want to sleep in?" he offered.

"No," I answered too fast. He restrained a smile.

"The same time as usual, then," he decided. "Will Charlie be there?"

"No, he's fishing tomorrow." I beamed at the memory of how conveniently things had worked out.

His voice turned sharp. "And if you don't come home, what will he think?"

"I have no idea," I answered coolly. "He knows I've been meaning to do the laundry. Maybe he'll think I fell in the washer." He scowled at me and I scowled back. His anger was much more impressive than mine.

"What are you hunting tonight?" I asked when I was sure I had lost the glowering contest.

"Whatever we find in the park. We aren't going far." He seemed bemused by my casual reference to his secret realities.

"Why are you going with Alice?" I wondered.

"Alice is the most... supportive." He frowned as he spoke.

"And the others?" I asked timidly. "What are they?" His brow puckered for a brief moment. "Incredulous, for the most part." I peeked quickly behind me at his family. They sat staring off in different directions, exactly the same as the first time I'd seen them. Only now they were four; their beautiful, bronze-haired brother sat across from me, his golden eyes troubled.

"They don't like me," I guessed.

"That's not it," he disagreed, but his eyes were too innocent. "They don't understand why I can't leave you alone."

I grimaced. "Neither do I, for that matter."

Edward shook his head slowly, rolling his eyes toward the ceiling before he met my gaze again. "I told you — you don't see yourself clearly at all. You're not like anyone I've ever known. You fascinate me." I glared at him, sure he was teasing now.

He smiled as he deciphered my expression. "Having the advantages I do," he murmured, touching his forehead discreetly, "I have a better than average grasp of human nature. People are predictable. But you... you never do what I expect. You always take me by surprise."

I looked away, my eyes wandering back to his family, embarrassed and dissatisfied. His words made me feel like a science experiment. I wanted to laugh at myself for expecting anything else.

"That part is easy enough to explain," he continued. I felt his eyes on my face but I couldn't look at him yet, afraid he might read the chagrin in my eyes. "But there's more… and it's not so easy to put into words —" I was still staring at the Cullens while he spoke. Suddenly Rosalie, his blond and breathtaking sister, turned to look at me. No, not to look — to glare, with dark, cold eyes. I wanted to look away, but her gaze held me until Edward broke off mid-sentence and made an angry noise under his breath. It was almost a hiss.

Rosalie turned her head, and I was relieved to be free. I looked back at Edward — and I knew he could see the confusion and fear that widened my eyes.

His face was tight as he explained. "I'm sorry about that. She's just worried. You see… it's dangerous for more than just me if, after spending so much time with you so publicly…" He looked down.

"If?"

"If this ends… badly." He dropped his head into his hands, as he had that night in Port Angeles. His anguish was plain; I yearned to comfort him, but I was at a loss to know how. My hand reached toward him involuntarily; quickly, though, I dropped it to the table, fearing that my touch would only make things worse. I realized slowly that his words should frighten

me. I waited for that fear to come, but all I could seem to feel was an ache for his pain.

And frustration — frustration that Rosalie had interrupted whatever he was about to say. I didn't know how to bring it up again. He still had his head in his hands.

I tried to speak in a normal voice. "And you have to leave now?"

"Yes." He raised his face; it was serious for a moment, and then his mood shifted and he smiled. "It's probably for the best. We still have fifteen minutes of that wretched movie left to endure in Biology — I don't think I could take any more."

I started. Alice — her short, inky hair in a halo of spiky disarray around her exquisite, elfin face — was suddenly standing behind his shoulder. Her slight frame was willowy, graceful even in absolute stillness.

He greeted her without looking away from me. "Alice."

"Edward," she answered, her high soprano voice almost as attractive as his.

"Alice, Bella — Bella, Alice," he introduced us, gesturing casually with his hand, a wry smile on his face.

"Hello, Bella." Her brilliant obsidian eyes were unreadable, but her smile was friendly. "It's nice to finally meet you." Edward flashed a dark look at her.

"Hi, Alice," I murmured shyly.

"Are you ready?" she asked him.

His voice was aloof. "Nearly. I'll meet you at the car." She left without another word; her walk was so fluid, so sinuous that I felt a sharp pang of jealousy.

"Should I say 'have fun,' or is that the wrong sentiment?" I asked, turning back to him.

"No, 'have fun' works as well as anything." He grinned.

"Have fun, then." I worked to sound wholehearted. Of course I didn't fool him.

"I'll try." He still grinned. "And you try to be safe, please."

"Safe in Forks — what a challenge."

"For you it is a challenge." His jaw hardened. "Promise."

"I promise to try to be safe," I recited. "I'll do the laundry tonight —

that ought to be fraught with peril."

"Don't fall in," he mocked.

"I'll do my best."

He stood then, and I rose, too.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I sighed.

"It seems like a long time to you, doesn't it?" he mused. I nodded glumly.

"I'll be there in the morning," he promised, smiling his crooked smile. He reached across the table to touch my face, lightly brushing along my cheekbone again. Then he turned and walked away. I stared after him until he was gone.

I was sorely tempted to ditch the rest of the day, at the very least Gym, but a warning instinct stopped me. I knew that if I disappeared now, Mike and others would assume I was with Edward. And Edward was worried about the time we'd spent together publicly... if things went wrong. I refused to dwell on the last thought, concentrating instead on making things safer for him.

I intuitively knew — and sensed he did, too — that tomorrow would be pivotal. Our relationship couldn't continue to balance, as it did, on the point of a knife. We would fall off one edge or the other, depending entirely upon his decision, or his instincts. My decision was made, made before I'd ever consciously chosen, and I was committed to seeing it through. Because there was nothing more terrifying to me, more excruciating, than the thought of turning away from him. It was an impossibility.

I went to class, feeling dutiful. I couldn't honestly say what happened in Biology; my mind was too preoccupied with thoughts of tomorrow. In Gym, Mike was speaking to me again; he wished me a good time in Seattle. I carefully explained that I'd canceled my trip, worried about my truck.

"Are you going to the dance with Cullen?" he asked, suddenly sulky.

"No, I'm not going to the dance at all."

"What are you doing, then?" he asked, too interested. My natural urge was to tell him to butt out. Instead, I lied brightly.

"Laundry, and then I have to study for the Trig test or I'm going to fail."

"Is Cullen helping you study?"

"Edward," I emphasized, "is not going to help me study. He's gone away somewhere for the weekend." The lies came more naturally than usual, I noted with surprise.

"Oh." He perked up. "You know, you could come to the dance with our group anyway — that would be cool. We'd all dance with you," he promised. The mental image of Jessica's face made my tone sharper than necessary.

"I'm not going to the dance, Mike, okay?"

"Fine." He sulked again. "I was just offering." When the school day had finally ended, I walked to the parking lot without enthusiasm. I did not especially want to walk home, but I couldn't see how he would have retrieved my truck. Then again, I was starting to believe that nothing was impossible for him. The latter instinct proved correct — my truck sat in the same space he'd parked his Volvo in this morning. I shook my head, incredulous, as I opened the unlocked door and saw the key in the ignition.

There was a piece of white paper folded on my seat. I got in and closed the door before I unfolded it. Two words were written in his elegant script.

Be safe.

The sound of the truck roaring to life frightened me. I laughed at myself. When I got home, the handle of the door was locked, the dead bolt unlocked, just as I'd left it this morning. Inside, I went straight to the laundry room. It looked just the same as I'd left it, too. I dug for my jeans and, after finding them, checked the pockets. Empty. Maybe I'd hung my key up after all, I thought, shaking my head.

Following the same instinct that had prompted me to lie to Mike, I called Jessica on the pretense of wishing her luck at the dance. When she offered the same wish for my day with Edward, I told her about the cancellation. She was more disappointed than really necessary for a third-party observer to be. I said goodbye quickly after that. Charlie was absentminded at dinner, worried over something at work, I guessed, or maybe a basketball game, or maybe he was just really enjoying the lasagna — it was hard to tell with Charlie.

"You know, Dad..." I began, breaking into his reverie.

"What's that, Bell?"

"I think you're right about Seattle. I think I'll wait until Jessica or someone else can go with me."

"Oh," he said, surprised. "Oh, okay. So, do you want me to stay home?"

"No, Dad, don't change your plans. I've got a million things to do...

homework, laundry... I need to go to the library and the grocery store. I'll be in and out all day... you go and have fun."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely, Dad. Besides, the freezer is getting dangerously low on fish

— we're down to a two, maybe three years' supply."

"You're sure easy to live with, Bella." He smiled.

"I could say the same thing about you," I said, laughing. The sound of my laughter was off, but he didn't seem to notice. I felt so guilty for deceiving him that I almost took Edward's advice and told him where I would be. Almost.

After dinner, I folded clothes and moved another load through the dryer. Unfortunately it was the kind of job that only keeps hands busy. My mind definitely had too much free time, and it was getting out of control. I fluctuated between anticipation so intense that it was very nearly pain, and an insidious fear that picked at my resolve. I had to keep reminding myself that I'd made my choice, and I wasn't going back on it. I pulled his note out of my pocket much more often than necessary to absorb the two small words he'd written. He wants me to be safe, I told myself again and again. I would just hold on to the faith that, in the end, that desire would win out over the others. And what was my other choice — to cut

him out of my life? Intolerable. Besides, since I'd come to Forks, it really seemed like my life was about him.

But a tiny voice in the back of my mind worried, wondering if it would hurt very much… if it ended badly.

I was relieved when it was late enough to be acceptable for bedtime. I knew I was far too stressed to sleep, so I did something I'd never done before. I deliberately took unnecessary cold medicine — the kind that knocked me out for a good eight hours. I normally wouldn't condone that type of behavior in myself, but tomorrow would be complicated enough without me being loopy from sleep deprivation on top of everything else. While I waited for the drugs to kick in, I dried my clean hair till it was impeccably straight, and fussed over what I would wear tomorrow. With everything ready for the morning, I finally lay in my bed. I felt hyper; I couldn't stop twitching. I got up and rifled through my shoebox of CDs until I found a collection of Chopin's nocturnes. I put that on very quietly and then lay down again, concentrating on relaxing individual parts of my body. Somewhere in the middle of that exercise, the cold pills took effect, and I gladly sank into unconsciousness. I woke early, having slept soundly and dreamlessly thanks to my gratuitous drug use. Though I was well rested, I slipped right back into the same hectic frenzy from the night before. I dressed in a rush, smoothing my collar against my neck, fidgeting with the tan sweater till it hung right over my jeans. I sneaked a swift look out the window to

see that Charlie was already gone. A thin, cottony layer of clouds veiled the sky. They didn't look very lasting.

I ate breakfast without tasting the food, hurrying to clean up when I was done. I peeked out the window again, but nothing had changed. I had just finished brushing my teeth and was heading back downstairs when a quiet knock sent my heart thudding against my rib cage.

I flew to the door; I had a little trouble with the simple dead bolt, but I yanked the door open at last, and there he was. All the agitation dissolved as soon as I looked at his face, calm taking its place. I breathed a sigh of relief — yesterday's fears seemed very foolish with him here.

He wasn't smiling at first — his face was somber. But then his expression lightened as he looked me over, and he laughed.

"Good morning," he chuckled.

"What's wrong?" I glanced down to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything important, like shoes, or pants.

"We match." He laughed again. I realized he had a long, light tan sweater on, with a white collar showing underneath, and blue jeans. I laughed with him, hiding a secret twinge of regret — why did he have to look like a runway model when I couldn't?

I locked the door behind me while he walked to the truck. He waited by the passenger door with a martyred expression that was easy to understand.

"We made a deal," I reminded him smugly, climbing into the driver's seat, and reaching over to unlock his door.

"Where to?" I asked.

"Put your seat belt on — I'm nervous already."

I gave him a dirty look as I complied.

"Where to?" I repeated with a sigh.

"Take the one-oh-one north," he ordered.

It was surprisingly difficult to concentrate on the road while feeling his gaze on my face. I compensated by driving more carefully than usual through the still-sleeping town.

"Were you planning to make it out of Forks before nightfall?"

"This truck is old enough to be your car's grandfather — have some respect," I retorted.

We were soon out of the town limits, despite his negativity. Thick underbrush and green-swathed trunks replaced the lawns and houses.

"Turn right on the one-ten," he instructed just as I was about to ask. I obeyed silently.

"Now we drive until the pavement ends."

I could hear a smile in his voice, but I was too afraid of driving off the road and proving him right to look over and be sure.

"And what's there, at the pavement's end?" I wondered.

"A trail."

"We're hiking?" Thank goodness I'd worn tennis shoes.

"Is that a problem?" He sounded as if he'd expected as much.

"No." I tried to make the lie sound confident. But if he thought my truck was slow...

"Don't worry, it's only five miles or so, and we're in no hurry." Five miles. I didn't answer, so that he wouldn't hear my voice crack in panic. Five miles of treacherous roots and loose stones, trying to twist my ankles or otherwise incapacitate me. This was going to be humiliating. We drove in silence for a while as I contemplated the coming horror.

"What are you thinking?" he asked impatiently after a few moments. I lied again. "Just wondering where we're going."

"It's a place I like to go when the weather is nice." We both glanced out the windows at the thinning clouds after he spoke.

"Charlie said it would be warm today."

"And did you tell Charlie what you were up to?" he asked.

"Nope."

"But Jessica thinks we're going to Seattle together?" He seemed cheered by the idea.

"No, I told her you canceled on me — which is true."

"No one knows you're with me?" Angrily, now.

"That depends… I assume you told Alice?"

"That's very helpful, Bella," he snapped.

I pretended I didn't hear that.

"Are you so depressed by Forks that it's made you suicidal?" he demanded when I ignored him.

"You said it might cause trouble for you… us being together publicly," I reminded him.

"So you're worried about the trouble it might cause me— if you don't come home?" His voice was still angry, and bitingly sarcastic. I nodded, keeping my eyes on the road.

He muttered something under his breath, speaking so quickly that I couldn't understand.

We were silent for the rest of the drive. I could feel the waves of infuriated disapproval rolling off of him, and I could think of nothing to say.

And then the road ended, constricting to a thin foot trail with a small wooden marker. I parked on the narrow shoulder and stepped out, afraid because he was angry with me and I didn't have driving as an excuse not to look at him. It was warm now, warmer than it had been in Forks since the day I'd arrived, almost muggy under the clouds. I pulled off my

sweater and knotted it around my waist, glad that I'd worn the light, sleeveless shirt — especially if I had five miles of hiking ahead of me. I heard his door slam, and looked over to see that he'd removed his sweater, too. He was facing away from me, into the unbroken forest beside my truck.

"This way," he said, glancing over his shoulder at me, eyes still annoyed. He started into the dark forest.

"The trail?" Panic was clear in my voice as I hurried around the truck to catch up to him.

"I said there was a trail at the end of the road, not that we were taking it."

"No trail?" I asked desperately.

"I won't let you get lost." He turned then, with a mocking smile, and I stifled a gasp. His white shirt was sleeveless, and he wore it unbuttoned, so that the smooth white skin of his throat flowed uninterrupted over the marble contours of his chest, his perfect musculature no longer merely hinted at behind concealing clothes. He was too perfect, I realized with a piercing stab of despair. There was no way this godlike creature could be meant for me.

He stared at me, bewildered by my tortured expression.

"Do you want to go home?" he said quietly, a different pain than mine saturating his voice.

"No." I walked forward till I was close beside him, anxious not to waste one second of whatever time I might have with him.

"What's wrong?" he asked, his voice gentle.

"I'm not a good hiker," I answered dully. "You'll have to be very patient."

"I can be patient — if I make a great effort." He smiled, holding my glance, trying to lift me out of my sudden, unexplained dejection. I tried to smile back, but the smile was unconvincing. He scrutinized my face.

"I'll take you home," he promised. I couldn't tell if the promise was unconditional, or restricted to an immediate departure. I knew he thought it was fear that upset me, and I was grateful again that I was the one person whose mind he couldn't hear.

"If you want me to hack five miles through the jungle before sundown, you'd better start leading the way," I said acidly. He frowned at me, struggling to understand my tone and expression.

He gave up after a moment and led the way into the forest. It wasn't as hard as I had feared. The way was mostly flat, and he held the damp ferns and webs of moss aside for me. When his straight path took us over fallen trees or boulders, he would help me, lifting me by the elbow, and then releasing me instantly when I was clear. His cold touch on my skin never failed to make my heart thud erratically. Twice, when that happened, I caught a look on his face that made me sure he could somehow hear it.

I tried to keep my eyes away from his perfection as much as possible, but I slipped often. Each time, his beauty pierced me through with sadness. For the

most part, we walked in silence. Occasionally he would ask a random question that he hadn't gotten to in the past two days of interrogation. He asked about my birthdays, my grade school teachers, my childhood pets — and I had to admit that after killing three fish in a row, I'd given up on the whole institution. He laughed at that, louder than I was used to — bell-like echoes bouncing back to us from the empty woods.

The hike took me most of the morning, but he never showed any sign of impatience. The forest spread out around us in a boundless labyrinth of ancient trees, and I began to be nervous that we would never find our way out again. He was perfectly at ease, comfortable in the green maze, never seeming to feel any doubt about our direction.

After several hours, the light that filtered through the canopy transformed, the murky olive tone shifting to a brighter jade. The day had turned sunny, just as he'd foretold. For the first time since we'd entered the woods, I felt a thrill of excitement — which quickly turned to impatience.

"Are we there yet?" I teased, pretending to scowl.

"Nearly." He smiled at the change in my mood. "Do you see the brightness ahead?"

I peered into the thick forest. "Um, should I?" He smirked. "Maybe it's a bit soon for your eyes."

"Time to visit the optometrist," I muttered. His smirk grew more pronounced.

But then, after another hundred yards, I could definitely see a lightening in the trees ahead, a glow that was yellow instead of green. I picked up the pace, my eagerness growing with every step. He let me lead now, following noiselessly.

I reached the edge of the pool of light and stepped through the last fringe of ferns into the loveliest place I had ever seen. The meadow was small, perfectly round, and filled with wildflowers — violet, yellow, and soft white. Somewhere nearby, I could hear the bubbling music of a stream. The sun was directly overhead, filling the circle with a haze of buttery sunshine. I walked slowly, awestruck, through the soft grass, swaying flowers, and warm, gilded air. I halfway turned, wanting to share this with him, but he wasn't behind me where I thought he'd be. I spun around, searching for him with sudden alarm. Finally I spotted him, still under the dense shade of the canopy at the edge of the hollow, watching me with cautious eyes. Only then did I remember what the beauty of the meadow had driven from my mind — the enigma of Edward and the sun, which he'd promised to illustrate for me today.

I took a step back toward him, my eyes alight with curiosity. His eyes were wary, reluctant. I smiled encouragingly and beckoned to him with my hand, taking another step back to him. He held up a hand in warning, and I hesitated, rocking back onto my heels.

Edward seemed to take a deep breath, and then he stepped out into the bright glow of the midday sun.

# Chapter 13

## CONFESSIONS

Edward in the sunlight was shocking. I couldn't get used to it, though I'd been staring at him all afternoon. His skin, white despite the faint flush from yesterday's hunting trip, literally sparkled, like thousands of tiny diamonds were embedded in the surface. He lay perfectly still in the grass, his shirt open over his sculpted, incandescent chest, his scintillating arms bare. His glistening, pale lavender lids were shut, though of course he didn't sleep. A perfect statue, carved in some unknown stone, smooth like marble, glittering like crystal. Now and then, his lips would move, so fast it looked like they were trembling. But, when I asked, he told me he was singing to himself; it was too low for me to hear.

I enjoyed the sun, too, though the air wasn't quite dry enough for my taste. I would have liked to lie back, as he did, and let the sun warm my face. But I stayed curled up, my chin resting on my knees, unwilling to take my eyes off him. The wind was gentle; it tangled my hair and ruffled the grass that swayed around his motionless form.

The meadow, so spectacular to me at first, paled next to his magnificence. Hesitantly, always afraid, even now, that he would disappear like a mirage, too beautiful to be real… hesitantly, I reached out one finger and stroked the back of his shimmering hand, where it lay within my reach. I marveled again at the perfect texture, satin smooth, cool as stone. When I

looked up again, his eyes were open, watching me. Butterscotch today, lighter, warmer after hunting. His quick smile turned up the corners of his flawless lips.

"I don't scare you?" he asked playfully, but I could hear the real curiosity in his soft voice.

"No more than usual."

He smiled wider; his teeth flashed in the sun.

I inched closer, stretched out my whole hand now to trace the contours of his forearm with my fingertips. I saw that my fingers trembled, and knew it wouldn't escape his notice.

"Do you mind?" I asked, for he had closed his eyes again.

"No," he said without opening his eyes. "You can't imagine how that feels." He sighed.

I lightly trailed my hand over the perfect muscles of his arm, followed the faint pattern of bluish veins inside the crease at his elbow. With my other hand, I reached to turn his hand over. Realizing what I wished, he flipped his palm up in one of those blindingly fast, disconcerting movements of his. It startled me; my fingers froze on his arm for a brief second.

"Sorry," he murmured. I looked up in time to see his golden eyes close again. "It's too easy to be myself with you."

I lifted his hand, turning it this way and that as I watched the sun glitter on his palm. I held it closer to my face, trying to see the hidden facets in his skin.

"Tell me what you're thinking," he whispered. I looked to see his eyes watching me, suddenly intent. "It's still so strange for me, not knowing."

"You know, the rest of us feel that way all the time."

"It's a hard life." Did I imagine the hint of regret in his tone? "But you didn't tell me."

"I was wishing I could know what you were thinking…" I hesitated.

"And?"

"I was wishing that I could believe that you were real. And I was wishing that I wasn't afraid."

"I don't want you to be afraid." His voice was just a soft murmur. I heard what he couldn't truthfully say, that I didn't need to be afraid, that there was nothing to fear.

"Well, that's not exactly the fear I meant, though that's certainly something to think about."

So quickly that I missed his movement, he was half sitting, propped up on his right arm, his left palm still in my hands. His angel's face was only a few inches from mine. I might have — should have — flinched away from his unexpected closeness, but I was unable to move. His golden eyes mesmerized me.

"What are you afraid of, then?" he whispered intently. But I couldn't answer. As I had just that once before, I smelled his cool breath in my face. Sweet, delicious, the scent made my mouth water. It was unlike anything else. Instinctively, unthinkingly, I leaned closer, inhaling.

And he was gone, his hand ripped from mine. In the time it took my eyes to focus, he was twenty feet away, standing at the edge of the small meadow, in the deep shade of a huge fir tree. He stared at me, his eyes dark in the shadows, his expression unreadable.

I could feel the hurt and shock on my face. My empty hands stung.

"I'm… sorry… Edward," I whispered. I knew he could hear.

"Give me a moment," he called, just loud enough for my less sensitive ears. I sat very still.

After ten incredibly long seconds, he walked back, slowly for him. He stopped, still several feet away, and sank gracefully to the ground, crossing his legs. His eyes never left mine. He took two deep breaths, and then smiled in apology.

"I am so very sorry." He hesitated. "Would you understand what I meant if I said I was only human?"

I nodded once, not quite able to smile at his joke. Adrenaline pulsed through my veins as the realization of danger slowly sank in. He could smell that from where he sat. His smile turned mocking.

"I'm the world's best predator, aren't I? Everything about me invites you in — my voice, my face, even my smell. As if I need any of that!" Unexpectedly, he was on his feet, bounding away, instantly out of sight, only to appear beneath the same tree as before, having circled the meadow in half a second.

"As if you could outrun me," he laughed bitterly. He reached up with one hand and, with a deafening crack, effortlessly ripped a two-foot-thick branch from the trunk of the spruce. He balanced it in that hand for a moment, and then threw it with blinding speed, shattering it against another huge tree, which shook and trembled at the blow.

And he was in front of me again, standing two feet away, still as a stone.

"As if you could fight me off," he said gently. I sat without moving, more frightened of him than I had ever been. I'd never seen him so completely freed of that carefully cultivated facade. He'd never been less human... or more beautiful. Face ashen, eyes wide, I sat like a bird locked in the eyes of a snake.

His lovely eyes seem to glow with rash excitement. Then, as the seconds passed, they dimmed. His expression slowly folded into a mask of ancient sadness.

"Don't be afraid," he murmured, his velvet voice unintentionally seductive. "I promise..." He hesitated. "I swear not to hurt you." He seemed more concerned with convincing himself than me.

"Don't be afraid," he whispered again as he stepped closer, with exaggerated slowness. He sat sinuously, with deliberately unhurried movements, till our faces were on the same level, just a foot apart.

"Please forgive me," he said formally. "I can control myself. You caught me off guard. But I'm on my best behavior now."

He waited, but I still couldn't speak.

"I'm not thirsty today, honestly." He winked.

At that I had to laugh, though the sound was shaky and breathless.

"Are you all right?" he asked tenderly, reaching out slowly, carefully, to place his marble hand back in mine.

I looked at his smooth, cold hand, and then at his eyes. They were soft, repentant. I looked back at his hand, and then deliberately returned to tracing the lines in his hand with my fingertip. I looked up and smiled timidly.

His answering smile was dazzling.

"So where were we, before I behaved so rudely?" he asked in the gentle cadences of an earlier century.

"I honestly can't remember."

He smiled, but his face was ashamed. "I think we were talking about why you were afraid, besides the obvious reason."

"Oh, right."

"Well?"

I looked down at his hand and doodled aimlessly across his smooth, iridescent palm. The seconds ticked by.

"How easily frustrated I am," he sighed. I looked into his eyes, abruptly grasping that this was every bit as new to him as it was to me. As many years of unfathomable experience as he had, this was hard for him, too. I took courage from that thought.

"I was afraid... because, for, well, obvious reasons, I can't stay with you. And I'm afraid that I'd like to stay with you, much more than I should." I looked down at his hands as I spoke. It was difficult for me to say this aloud.

"Yes," he agreed slowly. "That is something to be afraid of, indeed. Wanting to be with me. That's really not in your best interest." I frowned.

"I should have left long ago," he sighed. "I should leave now. But I don't know if I can."

"I don't want you to leave," I mumbled pathetically, staring down again.

"Which is exactly why I should. But don't worry. I'm essentially a selfish creature. I crave your company too much to do what I should."

"I'm glad."

"Don't be!" He withdrew his hand, more gently this time; his voice was harsher than usual. Harsh for him, still more beautiful than any human voice. It

was hard to keep up — his sudden mood changes left me always a step behind, dazed.

"It's not only your company I crave! Never forget that. Never forget I am more dangerous to you than I am to anyone else." He stopped, and I looked to see him gazing unseeingly into the forest.

I thought for a moment.

"I don't think I understand exactly what you mean — by that last part anyway," I said.

He looked back at me and smiled, his mood shifting yet again.

"How do I explain?" he mused. "And without frightening you again... hmmmm." Without seeming to think about it, he placed his hand back in mine; I held it tightly in both of mine. He looked at our hands.

"That's amazingly pleasant, the warmth." He sighed. A moment passed as he assembled his thoughts.

"You know how everyone enjoys different flavors?" he began. "Some people love chocolate ice cream, others prefer strawberry?" I nodded.

"Sorry about the food analogy — I couldn't think of another way to explain."

I smiled. He smiled ruefully back.

"You see, every person smells different, has a different essence. If you locked an alcoholic in a room full of stale beer, he'd gladly drink it. But he could resist, if

he wished to, if he were a recovering alcoholic. Now let's say you placed in that room a glass of hundred-year-old brandy, the rarest, finest cognac — and filled the room with its warm aroma — how do you think he would fare then?"

We sat silently, looking into each other's eyes — trying to read each other's thoughts.

He broke the silence first.

"Maybe that's not the right comparison. Maybe it would be too easy to turn down the brandy. Perhaps I should have made our alcoholic a heroin addict instead."

"So what you're saying is, I'm your brand of heroin?" I teased, trying to lighten the mood.

He smiled swiftly, seeming to appreciate my effort. "Yes, you are exactly my brand of heroin."

"Does that happen often?" I asked.

He looked across the treetops, thinking through his response.

"I spoke to my brothers about it." He still stared into the distance. "To Jasper, every one of you is much the same. He's the most recent to join our family. It's a struggle for him to abstain at all. He hasn't had time to grow sensitive to the differences in smell, in flavor." He glanced swiftly at me, his expression apologetic.

"Sorry," he said.

"I don't mind. Please don't worry about offending me, or frightening me, or whichever. That's the way you think. I can understand, or I can try to at least. Just explain however you can."

He took a deep breath and gazed at the sky again.

"So Jasper wasn't sure if he'd ever come across someone who was as" — he hesitated, looking for the right word — "appealing as you are to me. Which makes me think not. Emmett has been on the wagon longer, so to speak, and he understood what I meant. He says twice, for him, once stronger than the other."

"And for you?"

"Never."

The word hung there for a moment in the warm breeze.

"What did Emmett do?" I asked to break the silence. It was the wrong question to ask. His face grew dark, his hand clenched into a fist inside mine. He looked away. I waited, but he wasn't going to answer.

"I guess I know," I finally said.

He lifted his eyes; his expression was wistful, pleading.

"Even the strongest of us fall off the wagon, don't we?"

"What are you asking? My permission?" My voice was sharper than I'd intended. I tried to make my tone kinder — I could guess what his honesty must cost

him. "I mean, is there no hope, then?" How calmly I could discuss my own death!

"No, no!" He was instantly contrite. "Of course there's hope! I mean, of course I won't…" He left the sentence hanging. His eyes burned into mine.

"It's different for us. Emmett… these were strangers he happened across. It was a long time ago, and he wasn't as… practiced, as careful, as he is now."

He fell silent and watched me intently as I thought it through.

"So if we'd met… oh, in a dark alley or something…" I trailed off.

"It took everything I had not to jump up in the middle of that class full of children and —" He stopped abruptly, looking away. "When you walked past me, I could have ruined everything Carlisle has built for us, right then and there. If I hadn't been denying my thirst for the last, well, too many years, I wouldn't have been able to stop myself." He paused, scowling at the trees.

He glanced at me grimly, both of us remembering. "You must have thought I was possessed."

"I couldn't understand why. How you could hate me so quickly…"

"To me, it was like you were some kind of demon, summoned straight from my own personal hell to ruin me. The fragrance coming off your skin… I thought it would make me deranged that first day. In that one hour, I thought of a hundred different ways to lure

you from the room with me, to get you alone. And I fought them each back, thinking of my family, what I could do to them. I had to run out, to get away before I could speak the words that would make you follow..."

He looked up then at my staggered expression as I tried to absorb his bitter memories. His golden eyes scorched from under his lashes, hypnotic and deadly.

"You would have come," he promised.

I tried to speak calmly. "Without a doubt."

He frowned down at my hands, releasing me from the force of his stare.

"And then, as I tried to rearrange my schedule in a pointless attempt to avoid you, you were there — in that close, warm little room, the scent was maddening. I so very nearly took you then. There was only one other frail human there — so easily dealt with."

I shivered in the warm sun, seeing my memories anew through his eyes, only now grasping the danger. Poor Ms. Cope; I shivered again at how close I'd come to being inadvertently responsible for her death.

"But I resisted. I don't know how. I forced myself not to wait for you, not to follow you from the school. It was easier outside, when I couldn't smell you anymore, to think clearly, to make the right decision. I left the others near home — I was too ashamed to tell them how weak I was, they only knew something was very wrong — and then I went straight to

Carlisle, at the hospital, to tell him I was leaving." I stared in surprise.

"I traded cars with him — he had a full tank of gas and I didn't want to stop. I didn't dare to go home, to face Esme. She wouldn't have let me go without a scene. She would have tried to convince me that it wasn't necessary...

"By the next morning I was in Alaska." He sounded ashamed, as if admitting a great cowardice. "I spent two days there, with some old acquaintances... but I was homesick. I hated knowing I'd upset Esme, and the rest of them, my adopted family. In the pure air of the mountains it was hard to believe you were so irresistible. I convinced myself it was weak to run away. I'd dealt with temptation before, not of this magnitude, not even close, but I was strong. Who were you, an insignificant little girl" — he grinned suddenly — "to chase me from the place I wanted to be? So I came back..." He stared off into space. I couldn't speak.

"I took precautions, hunting, feeding more than usual before seeing you again. I was sure that I was strong enough to treat you like any other human. I was arrogant about it.

"It was unquestionably a complication that I couldn't simply read your thoughts to know what your reaction was to me. I wasn't used to having to go to such circuitous measures, listening to your words in Jessica's mind... her mind isn't very original, and it was annoying to have to stoop to that. And then I couldn't know if you really meant what you said. It

was all extremely irritating." He frowned at the memory.

"I wanted you to forget my behavior that first day, if possible, so I tried to talk with you like I would with any person. I was eager actually, hoping to decipher some of your thoughts. But you were too interesting, I found myself caught up in your expressions... and every now and then you would stir the air with your hand or your hair, and the scent would stun me again...

"Of course, then you were nearly crushed to death in front of my eyes. Later I thought of a perfectly good excuse for why I acted at that moment

— because if I hadn't saved you, if your blood had been spilled there in front of me, I don't think I could have stopped myself from exposing us for what we are. But I only thought of that excuse later. At the time, all I could think was, 'Not her.'"

He closed his eyes, lost in his agonized confession. I listened, more eager than rational. Common sense told me I should be terrified. Instead, I was relieved to finally understand. And I was filled with compassion for his suffering, even now, as he confessed his craving to take my life. I finally was able to speak, though my voice was faint. "In the hospital?" His eyes flashed up to mine. "I was appalled. I couldn't believe I had put us in danger after all, put myself in your power — you of all people. As if I needed another motive to kill you." We both flinched as that word slipped out. "But it had the opposite effect," he continued quickly. "I fought with Rosalie, Emmett,

and Jasper when they suggested that now was the time... the worst fight we've ever had. Carlisle sided with me, and Alice." He grimaced when he said her name. I couldn't imagine why. "Esme told me to do whatever I had to in order to stay." He shook his head indulgently.

"All that next day I eavesdropped on the minds of everyone you spoke to, shocked that you kept your word. I didn't understand you at all. But I knew that I couldn't become more involved with you. I did my very best to stay as far from you as possible. And every day the perfume of your skin, your breath, your hair... it hit me as hard as the very first day." He met my eyes again, and they were surprisingly tender.

"And for all that," he continued, "I'd have fared better if I had exposed us all at that first moment, than if now, here — with no witnesses and nothing to stop me — I were to hurt you."

I was human enough to have to ask. "Why?"

"Isabella." He pronounced my full name carefully, then playfully ruffled my hair with his free hand. A shock ran through my body at his casual touch. "Bella, I couldn't live with myself if I ever hurt you. You don't know how it's tortured me." He looked down, ashamed again. "The thought of you, still, white, cold... to never see you blush scarlet again, to never see that flash of intuition in your eyes when you see through my pretenses... it would be unendurable." He lifted his glorious, agonized eyes to mine. "You are the most important thing to me now. The most important thing to me ever."

My head was spinning at the rapid change in direction our conversation had taken. From the cheerful topic of my impending demise, we were suddenly declaring ourselves. He waited, and even though I looked down to study our hands between us, I knew his golden eyes were on me. "You already know how I feel, of course," I finally said. "I'm here... which, roughly translated, means I would rather die than stay away from you." I frowned. "I'm an idiot."

"You are an idiot," he agreed with a laugh. Our eyes met, and I laughed, too. We laughed together at the idiocy and sheer impossibility of such a moment.

"And so the lion fell in love with the lamb..." he murmured. I looked away, hiding my eyes as I thrilled to the word.

"What a stupid lamb," I sighed.

"What a sick, masochistic lion." He stared into the shadowy forest for a long moment, and I wondered where his thoughts had taken him.

"Why... ?" I began, and then paused, not sure how to continue. He looked at me and smiled; sunlight glinted off his face, his teeth.

"Yes?"

"Tell me why you ran from me before."

His smile faded. "You know why."

"No, I mean, exactly what did I do wrong? I'll have to be on my guard, you see, so I better start learning what I shouldn't do. This, for example" — I stroked

the back of his hand — "seems to be all right." He smiled again. "You didn't do anything wrong, Bella. It was my fault."

"But I want to help, if I can, to not make this harder for you."

"Well..." He contemplated for a moment. "It was just how close you were. Most humans instinctively shy away from us, are repelled by our alienness... I wasn't expecting you to come so close. And the smell of your throat." He stopped short, looking to see if he'd upset me.

"Okay, then," I said flippantly, trying to alleviate the suddenly tense atmosphere. I tucked my chin. "No throat exposure." It worked; he laughed. "No, really, it was more the surprise than anything else."

He raised his free hand and placed it gently on the side of my neck. I sat very still, the chill of his touch a natural warning — a warning telling me to be terrified. But there was no feeling of fear in me. There were, however, other feelings...

"You see," he said. "Perfectly fine." My blood was racing, and I wished I could slow it, sensing that this must make everything so much more difficult — the thudding of my pulse in my veins. Surely he could hear it.

"The blush on your cheeks is lovely," he murmured. He gently freed his other hand. My hands fell limply into my lap. Softly he brushed my cheek, then held my face between his marble hands.

"Be very still," he whispered, as if I wasn't already frozen. Slowly, never moving his eyes from mine, he leaned toward me. Then abruptly, but very gently, he rested his cold cheek against the hollow at the base of my throat. I was quite unable to move, even if I'd wanted to. I listened to the sound of his even breathing, watching the sun and wind play in his bronze hair, more human than any other part of him. With deliberate slowness, his hands slid down the sides of my neck. I shivered, and I heard him catch his breath. But his hands didn't pause as they softly moved to my shoulders, and then stopped.

His face drifted to the side, his nose skimming across my collarbone. He came to rest with the side of his face pressed tenderly against my chest. Listening to my heart.

"Ah," he sighed.

I don't know how long we sat without moving. It could have been hours. Eventually the throb of my pulse quieted, but he didn't move or speak again as he held me. I knew at any moment it could be too much, and my life could end — so quickly that I might not even notice. And I couldn't make myself be afraid. I couldn't think of anything, except that he was touching me.

And then, too soon, he released me.

His eyes were peaceful.

"It won't be so hard again," he said with satisfaction.

"Was that very hard for you?"

"Not nearly as bad as I imagined it would be. And you?"

"No, it wasn't bad... for me."

He smiled at my inflection. "You know what I mean." I smiled.

"Here." He took my hand and placed it against his cheek. "Do you feel how warm it is?"

And it was almost warm, his usually icy skin. But I barely noticed, for I was touching his face, something I'd dreamed of constantly since the first day I'd seen him.

"Don't move," I whispered.

No one could be still like Edward. He closed his eyes and became as immobile as stone, a carving under my hand.

I moved even more slowly than he had, careful not to make one unexpected move. I caressed his cheek, delicately stroked his eyelid, the purple shadow in the hollow under his eye. I traced the shape of his perfect nose, and then, so carefully, his flawless lips. His lips parted under my hand, and I could feel his cool breath on my fingertips. I wanted to lean in, to inhale the scent of him. So I dropped my hand and leaned away, not wanting to push him too far.

He opened his eyes, and they were hungry. Not in a way to make me fear, but rather to tighten the muscles in the pit of my stomach and send my pulse hammering through my veins again.

"I wish," he whispered, "I wish you could feel the... complexity... the confusion... I feel. That you could understand."

He raised his hand to my hair, then carefully brushed it across my face.

"Tell me," I breathed.

"I don't think I can. I've told you, on the one hand, the hunger — the thirst — that, deplorable creature that I am, I feel for you. And I think you can understand that, to an extent. Though" — he half-smiled — "as you are not addicted to any illegal substances, you probably can't empathize completely.

"But..." His fingers touched my lips lightly, making me shiver again.

"There are other hungers. Hungers I don't even understand, that are foreign to me."

"I may understand that better than you think."

"I'm not used to feeling so human. Is it always like this?"

"For me?" I paused. "No, never. Never before this." He held my hands between his. They felt so feeble in his iron strength.

"I don't know how to be close to you," he admitted. "I don't know if I can."

I leaned forward very slowly, cautioning him with my eyes. I placed my cheek against his stone chest. I could hear his breath, and nothing else.

"This is enough," I sighed, closing my eyes.

In a very human gesture, he put his arms around me and pressed his face against my hair.

"You're better at this than you give yourself credit for," I noted.

"I have human instincts — they may be buried deep, but they're there." We sat like that for another immeasurable moment; I wondered if he could be as unwilling to move as I was. But I could see the light was fading, the shadows of the forest beginning to touch us, and I sighed.

"You have to go."

"I thought you couldn't read my mind."

"It's getting clearer." I could hear a smile in his voice. He took my shoulders and I looked into his face.

"Can I show you something?" he asked, sudden excitement flaring in his eyes.

"Show me what?"

"I'll show you how I travel in the forest." He saw my expression. "Don't worry, you'll be very safe, and we'll get to your truck much faster." His mouth twitched up into that crooked smile so beautiful my heart nearly stopped.

"Will you turn into a bat?" I asked warily.

He laughed, louder than I'd ever heard. "Like I haven't heard that one before!"

"Right, I'm sure you get that all the time."

"Come on, little coward, climb on my back."

I waited to see if he was kidding, but, apparently, he meant it. He smiled as he read my hesitation, and reached for me. My heart reacted; even though he couldn't hear my thoughts, my pulse always gave me away. He then proceeded to sling me onto his back, with very little effort on my part, besides, when in place, clamping my legs and arms so tightly around him that it would choke a normal person. It was like clinging to a stone.

"I'm a bit heavier than your average backpack," I warned.

"Hah!" he snorted. I could almost hear his eyes rolling. I'd never seen him in such high spirits before.

He startled me, suddenly grabbing my hand, pressing my palm to his face, and inhaling deeply.

"Easier all the time," he muttered.

And then he was running.

If I'd ever feared death before in his presence, it was nothing compared to how I felt now.

He streaked through the dark, thick underbrush of the forest like a bullet, like a ghost. There was no sound, no evidence that his feet touched the earth. His breathing never changed, never indicated any effort. But the trees flew by at deadly speeds, always missing us by inches.

I was too terrified to close my eyes, though the cool forest air whipped against my face and burned them. I felt as if I were stupidly sticking my head out the window of an airplane in flight. And, for the first time in my life, I felt the dizzy faintness of motion sickness.

Then it was over. We'd hiked hours this morning to reach Edward's meadow, and now, in a matter of minutes, we were back to the truck.

"Exhilarating, isn't it?" His voice was high, excited. He stood motionless, waiting for me to climb down. I tried, but my muscles wouldn't respond. My arms and legs stayed locked around him while my head spun uncomfortably.

"Bella?" he asked, anxious now.

"I think I need to lie down," I gasped.

"Oh, sorry." He waited for me, but I still couldn't move.

"I think I need help," I admitted.

He laughed quietly, and gently unloosened my stranglehold on his neck. There was no resisting the iron strength of his hands. Then he pulled me around to face him, cradling me in his arms like a small child. He held me for a moment, then carefully placed me on the springy ferns.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

I couldn't be sure how I felt when my head was spinning so crazily.

"Dizzy, I think."

"Put your head between your knees."

I tried that, and it helped a little. I breathed in and out slowly, keeping my head very still. I felt him sitting beside me. The moments passed, and eventually I found that I could raise my head. There was a hollow ringing sound in my ears.

"I guess that wasn't the best idea," he mused.

I tried to be positive, but my voice was weak. "No, it was very interesting."

"Hah! You're as white as a ghost — no, you're as white as me!"

"I think I should have closed my eyes."

"Remember that next time."

"Next time!" I groaned.

He laughed, his mood still radiant.

"Show-off," I muttered.

"Open your eyes, Bella," he said quietly.

And he was right there, his face so close to mine. His beauty stunned my mind — it was too much, an excess I couldn't grow accustomed to.

"I was thinking, while I was running…" He paused.

"About not hitting the trees, I hope."

"Silly Bella," he chuckled. "Running is second nature to me, it's not something I have to think about."

"Show-off," I muttered again.

He smiled.

"No," he continued, "I was thinking there was something I wanted to try." And he took my face in his hands again.

I couldn't breathe.

He hesitated — not in the normal way, the human way.

Not the way a man might hesitate before he kissed a woman, to gauge her reaction, to see how he would be received. Perhaps he would hesitate to prolong the moment, that ideal moment of anticipation, sometimes better than the kiss itself.

Edward hesitated to test himself, to see if this was safe, to make sure he was still in control of his need.

And then his cold, marble lips pressed very softly against mine. What neither of us was prepared for was my response.

Blood boiled under my skin, burned in my lips. My breath came in a wild gasp. My fingers knotted in his hair, clutching him to me. My lips parted as I breathed in his heady scent.

Immediately I felt him turn to unresponsive stone beneath my lips. His hands gently, but with

irresistible force, pushed my face back. I opened my eyes and saw his guarded expression.

"Oops," I breathed.

"That's an understatement."

His eyes were wild, his jaw clenched in acute restraint, yet he didn't lapse from his perfect articulation. He held my face just inches from his. He dazzled my eyes.

"Should I... ?" I tried to disengage myself, to give him some room. His hands refused to let me move so much as an inch.

"No, it's tolerable. Wait for a moment, please." His voice was polite, controlled.

I kept my eyes on his, watched as the excitement in them faded and gentled.

Then he smiled a surprisingly impish grin.

"There," he said, obviously pleased with himself.

"Tolerable?" I asked.

He laughed aloud. "I'm stronger than I thought. It's nice to know."

"I wish I could say the same. I'm sorry."

"You are only human, after all."

"Thanks so much," I said, my voice acerbic.

He was on his feet in one of his lithe, almost invisibly quick movements. He held out his hand to me, an

unexpected gesture. I was so used to our standard of careful non-contact. I took his icy hand, needing the support more than I thought. My balance had not yet returned.

"Are you still faint from the run? Or was it my kissing expertise?" How lighthearted, how human he seemed as he laughed now, his seraphic face untroubled. He was a different Edward than the one I had known. And I felt all the more besotted by him. It would cause me physical pain to be separated from him now.

"I can't be sure, I'm still woozy," I managed to respond. "I think it's some of both, though."

"Maybe you should let me drive."

"Are you insane?" I protested.

"I can drive better than you on your best day," he teased. "You have much slower reflexes."

"I'm sure that's true, but I don't think my nerves, or my truck, could take it."

"Some trust, please, Bella."

My hand was in my pocket, curled tightly around the key. I pursed my lips, deliberated, then shook my head with a tight grin.

"Nope. Not a chance."

He raised his eyebrows in disbelief.

I started to step around him, heading for the driver's side. He might have let me pass if I hadn't wobbled

slightly. Then again, he might not have. His arm created an inescapable snare around my waist.

"Bella, I've already expended a great deal of personal effort at this point to keep you alive. I'm not about to let you behind the wheel of a vehicle when you can't even walk straight. Besides, friends don't let friends drive drunk," he quoted with a chuckle. I could smell the unbearably sweet fragrance coming off his chest.

"Drunk?" I objected.

"You're intoxicated by my very presence." He was grinning that playful smirk again.

"I can't argue with that," I sighed. There was no way around it; I couldn't resist him in anything. I held the key high and dropped it, watching his hand flash like lightning to catch it soundlessly. "Take it easy — my truck is a senior citizen."

"Very sensible," he approved.

"And are you not affected at all?" I asked, irked. "By my presence?" Again his mobile features transformed, his expression became soft, warm. He didn't answer at first; he simply bent his face to mine, and brushed his lips slowly along my jaw, from my ear to my chin, back and forth. I trembled.

"Regardless," he finally murmured, "I have better reflexes."

# Chapter 14

## MIND OVER MATTER

He could drive well, when he kept the speed reasonable, I had to admit. Like so many things, it seemed to be effortless to him. He barely looked at the road, yet the tires never deviated so much as a centimeter from the center of the lane. He drove one-handed, holding my hand on the seat. Sometimes he gazed into the setting sun, sometimes he glanced at me — my face, my hair blowing out the open window, our hands twined together. He had turned the radio to an oldies station, and he sang along with a song I'd never heard. He knew every line.

"You like fifties music?" I asked.

"Music in the fifties was good. Much better than the sixties, or the seventies, ugh!" He shuddered. "The eighties were bearable."

"Are you ever going to tell me how old you are?" I asked, tentative, not wanting to upset his buoyant humor.

"Does it matter much?" His smile, to my relief, remained unclouded.

"No, but I still wonder…" I grimaced. "There's nothing like an unsolved mystery to keep you up at night."

"I wonder if it will upset you," he reflected to himself. He gazed into the sun; the minutes passed.

"Try me," I finally said.

He sighed, and then looked into my eyes, seeming to forget the road completely for a time. Whatever he saw there must have encouraged him. He looked into the sun — the light of the setting orb glittered off his skin in ruby-tinged sparkles — and spoke.

"I was born in Chicago in 1901." He paused and glanced at me from the corner of his eyes. My face was carefully unsurprised, patient for the rest. He smiled a tiny smile and continued. "Carlisle found me in a hospital in the summer of 1918. I was seventeen, and dying of the Spanish influenza."

He heard my intake of breath, though it was barely audible to my own ears. He looked down into my eyes again.

"I don't remember it well — it was a very long time ago, and human memories fade." He was lost in his thoughts for a short time before he went on. "I do remember how it felt, when Carlisle saved me. It's not an easy thing, not something you could forget."

"Your parents?"

"They had already died from the disease. I was alone. That was why he chose me. In all the chaos of the epidemic, no one would ever realize I was gone."

"How did he... save you?"

A few seconds passed before he answered. He seemed to choose his words carefully.

"It was difficult. Not many of us have the restraint necessary to accomplish it. But Carlisle has always been the most humane, the most compassionate of

us... I don't think you could find his equal throughout all of history." He paused. "For me, it was merely very, very painful." I could tell from the set of his lips, he would say no more on this subject. I suppressed my curiosity, though it was far from idle. There were many things I needed to think through on this particular issue, things that were only beginning to occur to me. No doubt his quick mind had already comprehended every aspect that eluded me.

His soft voice interrupted my thoughts. "He acted from loneliness. That's usually the reason behind the choice. I was the first in Carlisle's family, though he found Esme soon after. She fell from a cliff. They brought her straight to the hospital morgue, though, somehow, her heart was still beating."

"So you must be dying, then, to become..." We never said the word, and I couldn't frame it now.

"No, that's just Carlisle. He would never do that to someone who had another choice." The respect in his voice was profound whenever he spoke of his father figure. "It is easier he says, though," he continued, "if the blood is weak." He looked at the now-dark road, and I could feel the subject closing again.

"And Emmett and Rosalie?"

"Carlisle brought Rosalie to our family next. I didn't realize till much later that he was hoping she would be to me what Esme was to him — he was careful with his thoughts around me." He rolled his eyes. "But she was never more than a sister. It was only two years later that she found Emmett. She was hunting — we were in Appalachia at the time — and

found a bear about to finish him off. She carried him back to Carlisle, more than a hundred miles, afraid she wouldn't be able to do it herself. I'm only beginning to guess how difficult that journey was for her." He threw a pointed glance in my direction, and raised our hands, still folded together, to brush my cheek with the back of his hand.

"But she made it," I encouraged, looking away from the unbearable beauty of his eyes.

"Yes," he murmured. "She saw something in his face that made her strong enough. And they've been together ever since. Sometimes they live separately from us, as a married couple. But the younger we pretend to be, the longer we can stay in any given place. Forks seemed perfect, so we all enrolled in high school." He laughed. "I suppose we'll have to go to their wedding in a few years, again."

"Alice and Jasper?"

"Alice and Jasper are two very rare creatures. They both developed a conscience, as we refer to it, with no outside guidance. Jasper belonged to another… family, a very different kind of family. He became depressed, and he wandered on his own. Alice found him. Like me, she has certain gifts above and beyond the norm for our kind."

"Really?" I interrupted, fascinated. "But you said you were the only one who could hear people's thoughts."

"That's true. She knows other things. She sees things — things that might happen, things that are coming.

But it's very subjective. The future isn't set in stone. Things change."

His jaw set when he said that, and his eyes darted to my face and away so quickly that I wasn't sure if I only imagined it.

"What kinds of things does she see?"

"She saw Jasper and knew that he was looking for her before he knew it himself. She saw Carlisle and our family, and they came together to find us. She's most sensitive to non-humans. She always sees, for example, when another group of our kind is coming near. And any threat they may pose."

"Are there a lot of… your kind?" I was surprised. How many of them could walk among us undetected?

"No, not many. But most won't settle in any one place. Only those like us, who've given up hunting you people" — a sly glance in my direction —

"can live together with humans for any length of time. We've only found one other family like ours, in a small village in Alaska. We lived together for a time, but there were so many of us that we became too noticeable. Those of us who live… differently tend to band together."

"And the others?"

"Nomads, for the most part. We've all lived that way at times. It gets tedious, like anything else. But we run across the others now and then, because most of us prefer the North."

"Why is that?"

We were parked in front of my house now, and he'd turned off the truck. It was very quiet and dark; there was no moon. The porch light was off so I knew my father wasn't home yet.

"Did you have your eyes open this afternoon?" he teased. "Do you think I could walk down the street in the sunlight without causing traffic accidents? There's a reason why we chose the Olympic Peninsula, one of the most sunless places in the world. It's nice to be able to go outside in the day. You wouldn't believe how tired you can get of nighttime in eighty-odd years."

"So that's where the legends came from?"

"Probably."

"And Alice came from another family, like Jasper?"

"No, and that is a mystery. Alice doesn't remember her human life at all. And she doesn't know who created her. She awoke alone. Whoever made her walked away, and none of us understand why, or how, he could. If she hadn't had that other sense, if she hadn't seen Jasper and Carlisle and known that she would someday become one of us, she probably would have turned into a total savage."

There was so much to think through, so much I still wanted to ask. But, to my great embarrassment, my stomach growled. I'd been so intrigued, I hadn't even noticed I was hungry. I realized now that I was ravenous.

"I'm sorry, I'm keeping you from dinner."

"I'm fine, really."

"I've never spent much time around anyone who eats food. I forget."

"I want to stay with you." It was easier to say in the darkness, knowing as I spoke how my voice would betray me, my hopeless addiction to him.

"Can't I come in?" he asked.

"Would you like to?" I couldn't picture it, this godlike creature sitting in my father's shabby kitchen chair.

"Yes, if it's all right." I heard the door close quietly, and almost simultaneously he was outside my door, opening it for me.

"Very human," I complimented him.

"It's definitely resurfacing."

He walked beside me in the night, so quietly I had to peek at him constantly to be sure he was still there. In the darkness he looked much more normal. Still pale, still dreamlike in his beauty, but no longer the fantastic sparkling creature of our sunlit afternoon.

He reached the door ahead of me and opened it for me. I paused halfway through the frame.

"The door was unlocked?"

"No, I used the key from under the eave."

I stepped inside, flicked on the porch light, and turned to look at him with my eyebrows raised. I was sure I'd never used that key in front of him.

"I was curious about you."

"You spied on me?" But somehow I couldn't infuse my voice with the proper outrage. I was flattered.

He was unrepentant. "What else is there to do at night?" I let it go for the moment and went down the hall to the kitchen. He was there before me, needing no guide. He sat in the very chair I'd tried to picture him in. His beauty lit up the kitchen. It was a moment before I could look away.

I concentrated on getting my dinner, taking last night's lasagna from the fridge, placing a square on a plate, heating it in the microwave. It revolved, filling the kitchen with the smell of tomatoes and oregano. I didn't take my eyes from the plate of food as I spoke.

"How often?" I asked casually.

"Hmmm?" He sounded as if I had pulled him from some other train of thought.

I still didn't turn around. "How often did you come here?"

"I come here almost every night."

I whirled, stunned. "Why?"

"You're interesting when you sleep." He spoke matter-of-factly. "You talk."

"No!" I gasped, heat flooding my face all the way to my hairline. I gripped the kitchen counter for support. I knew I talked in my sleep, of course; my mother teased me about it. I hadn't thought it was something I needed to worry about here, though.

His expression shifted instantly to chagrin. "Are you very angry with me?"

"That depends!" I felt and sounded like I'd had the breath knocked out of me.

He waited.

"On?" he urged.

"What you heard!" I wailed.

Instantly, silently, he was at my side, taking my hands carefully in his.

"Don't be upset!" he pleaded. He dropped his face to the level of my eyes, holding my gaze. I was embarrassed. I tried to look away.

"You miss your mother," he whispered. "You worry about her. And when it rains, the sound makes you restless. You used to talk about home a lot, but it's less often now. Once you said, 'It's too green.'" He laughed softly, hoping, I could see, not to offend me further.

"Anything else?" I demanded.

He knew what I was getting at. "You did say my name," he admitted. I sighed in defeat. "A lot?"

"How much do you mean by 'a lot,' exactly?"

"Oh no!" I hung my head.

He pulled me against his chest, softly, naturally.

"Don't be self-conscious," he whispered in my ear. "If I could dream at all, it would be about you. And I'm not ashamed of it." Then we both heard the sound of tires on the brick driveway, saw the headlights flash through the front windows, down the hall to us. I stiffened in his arms.

"Should your father know I'm here?" he asked.

"I'm not sure..." I tried to think it through quickly.

"Another time then..."

And I was alone.

"Edward!" I hissed.

I heard a ghostly chuckle, then nothing else.

My father's key turned in the door.

"Bella?" he called. It had bothered me before; who else would it be?

Suddenly he didn't seem so far off base.

"In here." I hoped he couldn't hear the hysterical edge to my voice. I grabbed my dinner from the microwave and sat at the table as he walked in. His footsteps sounded so noisy after my day with Edward.

"Can you get me some of that? I'm bushed." He stepped on the heels of his boots to take them off, holding the back of Edward's chair for support. I took my food with me, scarfing it down as I got his dinner.

It burned my tongue. I filled two glasses with milk while his lasagna was heating, and gulped mine to put out the fire. As I set the glass down, I noticed the milk trembling and realized my hand was shaking. Charlie sat in the chair, and the contrast between him and its former occupant was comical.

"Thanks," he said as I placed his food on the table.

"How was your day?" I asked. The words were rushed; I was dying to escape to my room.

"Good. The fish were biting… how about you? Did you get everything done that you wanted to?"

"Not really — it was too nice out to stay indoors." I took another big bite.

"It was a nice day," he agreed. What an understatement, I thought to myself.

Finished with the last bite of lasagna, I lifted my glass and chugged the remains of my milk.

Charlie surprised me by being observant. "In a hurry?"

"Yeah, I'm tired. I'm going to bed early."

"You look kinda keyed up," he noted. Why, oh why, did this have to be his night to pay attention?

"Do I?" was all I could manage in response. I quickly scrubbed my dishes clean in the sink, and placed them upside down on a dish towel to dry.

"It's Saturday," he mused.

I didn't respond.

"No plans tonight?" he asked suddenly.

"No, Dad, I just want to get some sleep."

"None of the boys in town your type, eh?" He was suspicious, but trying to play it cool.

"No, none of the boys have caught my eye yet." I was careful not to over-emphasize the word boys in my quest to be truthful with Charlie.

"I thought maybe that Mike Newton... you said he was friendly."

"He's Just a friend, Dad."

"Well, you're too good for them all, anyway. Wait till you get to college to start looking." Every father's dream, that his daughter will be out of the house before the hormones kick in.

"Sounds like a good idea to me," I agreed as I headed up the stairs.

"'Night, honey," he called after me. No doubt he would be listening carefully all evening, waiting for me to try to sneak out.

"See you in the morning, Dad." See you creeping into my room tonight at midnight to check on me.

I worked to make my tread sound slow and tired as I walked up the stairs to my room. I shut the door loud enough for him to hear, and then sprinted on my tiptoes to the window. I threw it open and leaned out

into the night. My eyes scanned the darkness, the impenetrable shadows of the trees.

"Edward?" I whispered, feeling completely idiotic. The quiet, laughing response came from behind me. "Yes?" I whirled, one hand flying to my throat in surprise.

He lay, smiling hugely, across my bed, his hands behind his head, his feet dangling off the end, the picture of ease.

"Oh!" I breathed, sinking unsteadily to the floor.

"I'm sorry." He pressed his lips together, trying to hide his amusement.

"Just give me a minute to restart my heart."

He sat up slowly, so as not to startle me again. Then he leaned forward and reached out with his long arms to pick me up, gripping the tops of my arms like I was a toddler. He sat me on the bed beside him.

"Why don't you sit with me," he suggested, putting a cold hand on mine.

"How's the heart?"

"You tell me — I'm sure you hear it better than I do." I felt his quiet laughter shake the bed.

We sat there for a moment in silence, both listening to my heartbeat slow. I thought about having Edward in my room, with my father in the house.

"Can I have a minute to be human?" I asked.

"Certainly." He gestured with one hand that I should proceed.

"Stay," I said, trying to look severe.

"Yes, ma'am." And he made a show of becoming a statue on the edge of my bed.

I hopped up, grabbing my pajamas from off the floor, my bag of toiletries off the desk. I left the light off and slipped out, closing the door. I could hear the sound from the TV rising up the stairs. I banged the bathroom door loudly, so Charlie wouldn't come up to bother me. I meant to hurry. I brushed my teeth fiercely, trying to be thorough and speedy, removing all traces of lasagna. But the hot water of the shower couldn't be rushed. It unknotted the muscles in my back, calmed my pulse. The familiar smell of my shampoo made me feel like I might be the same person I had been this morning. I tried not to think of Edward, sitting in my room, waiting, because then I had to start all over with the calming process. Finally, I couldn't delay anymore. I shut off the water, toweling hastily, rushing again. I pulled on my holey t-shirt and gray sweatpants. Too late to regret not packing the Victoria's Secret silk pajamas my mother got me two birthdays ago, which still had the tags on them in a drawer somewhere back home.

I rubbed the towel through my hair again, and then yanked the brush through it quickly. I threw the towel in the hamper, flung my brush and toothpaste into my bag. Then I dashed down the stairs so Charlie could see that I was in my pajamas, with wet hair.

"'Night, Dad."

"'Night, Bella." He did look startled by my appearance. Maybe that would keep him from checking on me tonight.

I took the stairs two at a time, trying to be quiet, and flew into my room, closing the door tightly behind me.

Edward hadn't moved a fraction of an inch, a carving of Adonis perched on my faded quilt. I smiled, and his lips twitched, the statue coming to life.

His eyes appraised me, taking in the damp hair, the tattered shirt. He raised one eyebrow. "Nice."

I grimaced.

"No, it looks good on you."

"Thanks," I whispered. I went back to his side, sitting cross-legged beside him. I looked at the lines in the wooden floor.

"What was all that for?"

"Charlie thinks I'm sneaking out."

"Oh." He contemplated that. "Why?" As if he couldn't know Charlie's mind much more clearly than I could guess.

"Apparently, I look a little overexcited."

He lifted my chin, examining my face.

"You look very warm, actually."

He bent his face slowly to mine, laying his cool cheek against my skin. I held perfectly still.

"Mmmmmm…" he breathed.

It was very difficult, while he was touching me, to frame a coherent question. It took me a minute of scattered concentration to begin.

"It seems to be… much easier for you, now, to be close to me."

"Does it seem that way to you?" he murmured, his nose gliding to the corner of my jaw. I felt his hand, lighter than a moth's wing, brushing my damp hair back, so that his lips could touch the hollow beneath my ear.

"Much, much easier," I said, trying to exhale.

"Hmm."

"So I was wondering…" I began again, but his fingers were slowly tracing my collarbone, and I lost my train of thought.

"Yes?" he breathed.

"Why is that," my voice shook, embarrassing me, "do you think?" I felt the tremor of his breath on my neck as he laughed. "Mind over matter."

I pulled back; as I moved, he froze — and I could no longer hear the sound of his breathing.

We stared cautiously at each other for a moment, and then, as his clenched jaw gradually relaxed, his expression became puzzled.

"Did I do something wrong?"

"No — the opposite. You're driving me crazy," I explained. He considered that briefly, and when he spoke, he sounded pleased.

"Really?" A triumphant smile slowly lit his face.

"Would you like a round of applause?" I asked sarcastically. He grinned.

"I'm just pleasantly surprised," he clarified. "In the last hundred years or so," his voice was teasing, "I never imagined anything like this. I didn't believe I would ever find someone I wanted to be with... in another way than my brothers and sisters. And then to find, even though it's all new to me, that I'm good at it... at being with you..."

"You're good at everything," I pointed out.

He shrugged, allowing that, and we both laughed in whispers.

"But how can it be so easy now?" I pressed. "This afternoon..."

"It's not easy," he sighed. "But this afternoon, I was still... undecided. I am sorry about that, it was unforgivable for me to behave so."

"Not unforgivable," I disagreed.

"Thank you." He smiled. "You see," he continued, looking down now, "I wasn't sure if I was strong enough..." He picked up one of my hands and pressed it lightly to his face. "And while there was still that possibility that I might be... overcome" — he breathed in the scent at my wrist — "I was... susceptible. Until

I made up my mind that I was strong enough, that there was no possibility at all that I would… that I ever could…"

I'd never seen him struggle so hard for words. It was so… human.

"So there's no possibility now?"

"Mind over matter," he repeated, smiling, his teeth bright even in the darkness.

"Wow, that was easy," I said.

He threw back his head and laughed, quietly as a whisper, but still exuberantly.

"Easy for you!" he amended, touching my nose with his fingertip. And then his face was abruptly serious.

"I'm trying," he whispered, his voice pained. "If it gets to be… too much, I'm fairly sure I'll be able to leave."

I scowled. I didn't like the talk of leaving.

"And it will be harder tomorrow," he continued. "I've had the scent of you in my head all day, and I've grown amazingly desensitized. If I'm away from you for any length of time, I'll have to start over again. Not quite from scratch, though, I think."

"Don't go away, then," I responded, unable to hide the longing in my voice.

"That suits me," he replied, his face relaxing into a gentle smile.

"Bring on the shackles — I'm your prisoner." But his long hands formed manacles around my wrists as he spoke. He laughed his quiet, musical laugh. He'd laughed more tonight than I'd ever heard in all the time I'd spent with him.

"You seem more... optimistic than usual," I observed. "I haven't seen you like this before."

"Isn't it supposed to be like this?" He smiled. "The glory of first love, and all that. It's incredible, isn't it, the difference between reading about something, seeing it in the pictures, and experiencing it?"

"Very different," I agreed. "More forceful than I'd imagined."

"For example" — his words flowed swiftly now, I had to concentrate to catch it all — "the emotion of jealousy. I've read about it a hundred thousand times, seen actors portray it in a thousand different plays and movies. I believed I understood that one pretty clearly. But it shocked me..." He grimaced. "Do you remember the day that Mike asked you to the dance?"

I nodded, though I remembered that day for a different reason. "The day you started talking to me again."

"I was surprised by the flare of resentment, almost fury, that I felt — I didn't recognize what it was at first. I was even more aggravated than usual that I couldn't know what you were thinking, why you refused him. Was it simply for your friend's sake? Was there someone else? I knew I had no right to care either way. I tried not to care.

"And then the line started forming," he chuckled. I scowled in the darkness.

"I waited, unreasonably anxious to hear what you would say to them, to watch your expressions. I couldn't deny the relief I felt, watching the annoyance on your face. But I couldn't be sure.

"That was the first night I came here. I wrestled all night, while watching you sleep, with the chasm between what I knew was right, moral, ethical, and what I wanted. I knew that if I continued to ignore you as I should, or if I left for a few years, till you were gone, that someday you would say yes to Mike, or someone like him. It made me angry.

"And then," he whispered, "as you were sleeping, you said my name. You spoke so clearly, at first I thought you'd woken. But you rolled over restlessly and mumbled my name once more, and sighed. The feeling that coursed through me then was unnerving, staggering. And I knew I couldn't ignore you any longer." He was silent for a moment, probably listening to the suddenly uneven pounding of my heart.

"But jealousy... it's a strange thing. So much more powerful than I would have thought. And irrational! Just now, when Charlie asked you about that vile Mike Newton..." He shook his head angrily.

"I should have known you'd be listening," I groaned.

"Of course."

"That made you feel jealous, though, really?"

"I'm new at this; you're resurrecting the human in me, and everything feels stronger because it's fresh."

"But honestly," I teased, "for that to bother you, after I have to hear that Rosalie — Rosalie, the incarnation of pure beauty, Rosalie — was meant for you. Emmett or no Emmett, how can I compete with that?"

"There's no competition." His teeth gleamed. He drew my trapped hands around his back, holding me to his chest. I kept as still as I could, even breathing with caution.

"I know there's no competition," I mumbled into his cold skin. "That's the problem."

"Of course Rosalie is beautiful in her way, but even if she wasn't like a sister to me, even if Emmett didn't belong with her, she could never have one tenth, no, one hundredth of the attraction you hold for me." He was serious now, thoughtful. "For almost ninety years I've walked among my kind, and yours... all the time thinking I was complete in myself, not realizing what I was seeking. And not finding anything, because you weren't alive yet."

"It hardly seems fair," I whispered, my face still resting on his chest, listening to his breath come and go. "I haven't had to wait at all. Why should I get off so easily?"

"You're right," he agreed with amusement. "I should make this harder for you, definitely." He freed one of his hands, released my wrist, only to gather it carefully into his other hand. He stroked my wet hair softly, from the top of my head to my waist. "You only

have to risk your life every second you spend with me, that's surely not much. You only have to turn your back on nature, on humanity... what's that worth?"

"Very little — I don't feel deprived of anything."

"Not yet." And his voice was abruptly full of ancient grief. I tried to pull back, to look in his face, but his hand locked my wrists in an unbreakable hold.

"What —" I started to ask, when his body became alert. I froze, but he suddenly released my hands, and disappeared. I narrowly avoided falling on my face.

"Lie down!" he hissed. I couldn't tell where he spoke from in the darkness.

I rolled under my quilt, balling up on my side, the way I usually slept. I heard the door crack open, as Charlie peeked in to make sure I was where I was supposed to be. I breathed evenly, exaggerating the movement. A long minute passed. I listened, not sure if I'd heard the door close. Then Edward's cool arm was around me, under the covers, his lips at my ear.

"You are a terrible actress — I'd say that career path is out for you."

"Darn it," I muttered. My heart was crashing in my chest. He hummed a melody I didn't recognize; it sounded like a lullaby. He paused. "Should I sing you to sleep?"

"Right," I laughed. "Like I could sleep with you here!"

"You do it all the time," he reminded me.

"But I didn't know you were here," I replied icily.

"So if you don't want to sleep..." he suggested, ignoring my tone. My breath caught.

"If I don't want to sleep... ?"

He chuckled. "What do you want to do then?"

I couldn't answer at first.

"I'm not sure," I finally said.

"Tell me when you decide."

I could feel his cool breath on my neck, feel his nose sliding along my jaw, inhaling.

"I thought you were desensitized."

"Just because I'm resisting the wine doesn't mean I can't appreciate the bouquet," he whispered. "You have a very floral smell, like lavender... or freesia," he noted. "It's mouthwatering."

"Yeah, it's an off day when I don't get somebody telling me how edible I smell."

He chuckled, and then sighed.

"I've decided what I want to do," I told him. "I want to hear more about you."

"Ask me anything."

I sifted through my questions for the most vital. "Why do you do it?" I said. "I still don't understand how you can work so hard to resist what you... are. Please don't misunderstand, of course I'm glad that you do. I

just don't see why you would bother in the first place." He hesitated before answering. "That's a good question, and you are not the first one to ask it. The others — the majority of our kind who are quite content with our lot — they, too, wonder at how we live. But you see, just because we've been... dealt a certain hand... it doesn't mean that we can't choose to rise above — to conquer the boundaries of a destiny that none of us wanted. To try to retain whatever essential humanity we can."

I lay unmoving, locked in awed silence.

"Did you fall asleep?" he whispered after a few minutes.

"No."

"Is that all you were curious about?"

I rolled my eyes. "Not quite."

"What else do you want to know?"

"Why can you read minds — why only you? And Alice, seeing the future... why does that happen?"

I felt him shrug in the darkness. "We don't really know. Carlisle has a theory... he believes that we all bring something of our strongest human traits with us into the next life, where they are intensified — like our minds, and our senses. He thinks that I must have already been very sensitive to the thoughts of those around me. And that Alice had some precognition, wherever she was."

"What did he bring into the next life, and the others?"

"Carlisle brought his compassion. Esme brought her ability to love passionately. Emmett brought his strength, Rosalie her… tenacity. Or you could call it pigheadedness." he chuckled. "Jasper is very interesting. He was quite charismatic in his first life, able to influence those around him to see things his way. Now he is able to manipulate the emotions of those around him — calm down a room of angry people, for example, or excite a lethargic crowd, conversely. It's a very subtle gift."

I considered the impossibilities he described, trying to take it in. He waited patiently while I thought.

"So where did it all start? I mean, Carlisle changed you, and then someone must have changed him, and so on…"

"Well, where did you come from? Evolution? Creation? Couldn't we have evolved in the same way as other species, predator and prey? Or, if you don't believe that all this world could have just happened on its own, which is hard for me to accept myself, is it so hard to believe that the same force that created the delicate angelfish with the shark, the baby seal and the killer whale, could create both our kinds together?"

"Let me get this straight — I'm the baby seal, right?"

"Right." He laughed, and something touched my hair — his lips?

I wanted to turn toward him, to see if it was really his lips against my hair. But I had to be good; I didn't

want to make this any harder for him than it already was.

"Are you ready to sleep?" he asked, interrupting the short silence. "Or do you have any more questions?"

"Only a million or two."

"We have tomorrow, and the next day, and the next..." he reminded me. I smiled, euphoric at the thought.

"Are you sure you won't vanish in the morning?" I wanted this to be certain. "You are mythical, after all."

"I won't leave you." His voice had the seal of a promise in it.

"One more, then, tonight..." And I blushed. The darkness was no help — I'm sure he could feel the sudden warmth under my skin.

"What is it?"

"No, forget it. I changed my mind."

"Bella, you can ask me anything."

I didn't answer, and he groaned.

"I keep thinking it will get less frustrating, not hearing your thoughts. But it just gets worse and worse."

"I'm glad you can't read my thoughts. It's bad enough that you eavesdrop on my sleep-talking."

"Please?" His voice was so persuasive, so impossible to resist. I shook my head.

"If you don't tell me, I'll just assume it's something much worse than it is," he threatened darkly. "Please?" Again, that pleading voice.

"Well," I began, glad that he couldn't see my face.

"Yes?"

"You said that Rosalie and Emmett will get married soon... Is that...

marriage... the same as it is for humans?"

He laughed in earnest now, understanding. "Is that what you're getting at?"

I fidgeted, unable to answer.

"Yes, I suppose it is much the same," he said. "I told you, most of those human desires are there, just hidden behind more powerful desires."

"Oh," was all I could say.

"Was there a purpose behind your curiosity?"

"Well, I did wonder... about you and me... someday..." He was instantly serious, I could tell by the sudden stillness of his body. I froze, too, reacting automatically.

"I don't think that... that... would be possible for us."

"Because it would be too hard for you, if I were that... close?"

"That's certainly a problem. But that's not what I was thinking of. It's just that you are so soft, so fragile. I have to mind my actions every moment that we're

together so that I don't hurt you. I could kill you quite easily, Bella, simply by accident." His voice had become just a soft murmur. He moved his icy palm to rest it against my cheek. "If I was too hasty… if for one second I wasn't paying enough attention, I could reach out, meaning to touch your face, and crush your skull by mistake. You don't realize how incredibly breakable you are. I can never, never afford to lose any kind of control when I'm with you." He waited for me to respond, growing anxious when I didn't. "Are you scared?" he asked.

I waited for a minute to answer, so the words would be true. "No. I'm fine."

He seemed to deliberate for a moment. "I'm curious now, though," he said, his voice light again. "Have you ever… ?" He trailed off suggestively.

"Of course not." I flushed. "I told you I've never felt like this about anyone before, not even close."

"I know. It's just that I know other people's thoughts. I know love and lust don't always keep the same company."

"They do for me. Now, anyway, that they exist for me at all," I sighed.

"That's nice. We have that one thing in common, at least." He sounded satisfied.

"Your human instincts…" I began. He waited. "Well, do you find me attractive, in that way, at all?"

He laughed and lightly rumpled my nearly dry hair.

"I may not be a human, but I am a man," he assured me. I yawned involuntarily.

"I've answered your questions, now you should sleep," he insisted.

"I'm not sure if I can."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No!" I said too loudly.

He laughed, and then began to hum that same, unfamiliar lullaby; the voice of an archangel, soft in my ear.

More tired than I realized, exhausted from the long day of mental and emotional stress like I'd never felt before, I drifted to sleep in his cold arms.

# Chapter 15

## THE CULLENS

The muted light of yet another cloudy day eventually woke me. I lay with my arm across my eyes, groggy and dazed. Something, a dream trying to be remembered, struggled to break into my consciousness. I moaned and rolled on my side, hoping more sleep would come. And then the previous day flooded back into my awareness.

"Oh!" I sat up so fast it made my head spin.

"Your hair looks like a haystack… but I like it." His unruffled voice came from the rocking chair in the corner.

"Edward! You stayed!" I rejoiced, and thoughtlessly threw myself across the room and into his lap. In the instant that my thoughts caught up with my actions, I froze, shocked by my own uncontrolled enthusiasm. I stared up at him, afraid that I had crossed the wrong line.

But he laughed.

"Of course," he answered, startled, but seeming pleased by my reaction. His hands rubbed my back.

I laid my head cautiously against his shoulder, breathing in the smell of his skin.

"I was sure it was a dream."

"You're not that creative," he scoffed.

"Charlie!" I remembered, thoughtlessly jumping up again and heading to the door.

"He left an hour ago — after reattaching your battery cables, I might add. I have to admit I was disappointed. Is that really all it would take to stop you, if you were determined to go?"

I deliberated where I stood, wanting to return to him badly, but afraid I might have morning breath.

"You're not usually this confused in the morning," he noted. He held his arms open for me to return. A nearly irresistible invitation.

"I need another human minute," I admitted.

"I'll wait."

I skipped to the bathroom, my emotions unrecognizable. I didn't know myself, inside or out. The face in the mirror was practically a stranger

— eyes too bright, hectic spots of red across my cheekbones. After I brushed my teeth, I worked to straighten out the tangled chaos that was my hair. I splashed my face with cold water, and tried to breathe normally, with no noticeable success. I half-ran back to my room. It seemed like a miracle that he was there, his arms still waiting for me. He reached out to me, and my heart thumped unsteadily.

"Welcome back," he murmured, taking me into his arms. He rocked me for a while in silence, until I noticed that his clothes were changed, his hair smooth.

"You left?" I accused, touching the collar of his fresh shirt.

"I could hardly leave in the clothes I came in — what would the neighbors think?"

I pouted.

"You were very deeply asleep; I didn't miss anything." His eyes gleamed.

"The talking came earlier."

I groaned. "What did you hear?"

His gold eyes grew very soft. "You said you loved me."

"You knew that already," I reminded him, ducking my head.

"It was nice to hear, just the same."

I hid my face against his shoulder.

"I love you," I whispered.

"You are my life now," he answered simply.

There was nothing more to say for the moment. He rocked us back and forth as the room grew lighter.

"Breakfast time," he said eventually, casually — to prove, I'm sure, that he remembered all my human frailties.

So I clutched my throat with both hands and stared at him with wide eyes. Shock crossed his face.

"Kidding!" I snickered. "And you said I couldn't act!" He frowned in disgust. "That wasn't funny."

"It was very funny, and you know it." But I examined his gold eyes carefully, to make sure that I was forgiven. Apparently, I was.

"Shall I rephrase?" he asked. "Breakfast time for the human."

"Oh, okay."

He threw me over his stone shoulder, gently, but with a swiftness that left me breathless. I protested as he carried me easily down the stairs, but he ignored me. He sat me right side up on a chair.

The kitchen was bright, happy, seeming to absorb my mood.

"What's for breakfast?" I asked pleasantly.

That threw him for a minute.

"Er, I'm not sure. What would you like?" His marble brow puckered. I grinned, hopping up.

"That's all right, I fend for myself pretty well. Watch me hunt." I found a bowl and a box of cereal. I could feel his eyes on me as I poured the milk and grabbed a spoon. I sat my food on the table, and then paused.

"Can I get you anything?" I asked, not wanting to be rude. He rolled his eyes. "Just eat, Bella."

I sat at the table, watching him as I took a bite. He was gazing at me, studying my every movement. It

made me self-conscious. I cleared my mouth to speak, to distract him.

"What's on the agenda for today?" I asked.

"Hmmm..." I watched him frame his answer carefully. "What would you say to meeting my family?"

I gulped.

"Are you afraid now?" He sounded hopeful.

"Yes," I admitted; how could I deny it — he could see my eyes.

"Don't worry." He smirked. "I'll protect you."

"I'm not afraid of them," I explained. "I'm afraid they won't... like me. Won't they be, well, surprised that you would bring someone... like me...

home to meet them? Do they know that I know about them?"

"Oh, they already know everything. They'd taken bets yesterday, you know"

— he smiled, but his voice was harsh — "on whether I'd bring you back, though why anyone would bet against Alice, I can't imagine. At any rate, we don't have secrets in the family. It's not really feasible, what with my mind reading and Alice seeing the future and all that."

"And Jasper making you feel all warm and fuzzy about spilling your guts, don't forget that."

"You paid attention," he smiled approvingly.

"I've been known to do that every now and then." I grimaced. "So did Alice see me coming?"

His reaction was strange. "Something like that," he said uncomfortably, turning away so I couldn't see his eyes. I stared at him curiously.

"Is that any good?" he asked, turning back to me abruptly and eyeing my breakfast with a teasing look on his face. "Honestly, it doesn't look very appetizing."

"Well, it's no irritable grizzly…" I murmured, ignoring him when he glowered. I was still wondering why he responded that way when I mentioned Alice. I hurried through my cereal, speculating. He stood in the middle of the kitchen, the statue of Adonis again, staring abstractedly out the back windows.

Then his eyes were back on me, and he smiled his heartbreaking smile.

"And you should introduce me to your father, too, I think."

"He already knows you," I reminded him.

"As your boyfriend, I mean."

I stared at him with suspicion. "Why?"

"Isn't that customary?" he asked innocently.

"I don't know," I admitted. My dating history gave me few reference points to work with. Not that any normal rules of dating applied here.

"That's not necessary, you know. I don't expect you to… I mean, you don't have to pretend for me."

His smile was patient. "I'm not pretending."

I pushed the remains of my cereal around the edges of the bowl, biting my lip.

"Are you going to tell Charlie I'm your boyfriend or not?" he demanded.

"Is that what you are?" I suppressed my internal cringing at the thought of Edward and Charlie and the word boy friend all in the same room at the same time.

"It's a loose interpretation of the word 'boy,' I'll admit."

"I was under the impression that you were something more, actually," I confessed, looking at the table.

"Well, I don't know if we need to give him all the gory details." He reached across the table to lift my chin with a cold, gentle finger. "But he will need some explanation for why I'm around here so much. I don't want Chief Swan getting a restraining order put on me."

"Will you be?" I asked, suddenly anxious. "Will you really be here?"

"As long as you want me," he assured me.

"I'll always want you," I warned him. "Forever." He walked slowly around the table, and, pausing a few feet away, he reached out to touch his fingertips to my cheek. His expression was unfathomable.

"Does that make you sad?" I asked.

He didn't answer. He stared into my eyes for an immeasurable period of time.

"Are you finished?" he finally asked.

I jumped up. "Yes."

"Get dressed — I'll wait here."

It was hard to decide what to wear. I doubted there were any etiquette books detailing how to dress when your vampire sweetheart takes you home to meet his vampire family. It was a relief to think the word to myself. I knew I shied away from it intentionally.

I ended up in my only skirt — long, khaki-colored, still casual. I put on the dark blue blouse he'd once complimented. A quick glance in the mirror told me my hair was entirely impossible, so I pulled it back into a pony tail.

"Okay." I bounced down the stairs. "I'm decent." He was waiting at the foot of the stairs, closer than I'd thought, and I bounded right into him. He steadied me, holding me a careful distance away for a few seconds before suddenly pulling me closer.

"Wrong again," he murmured in my ear. "You are utterly indecent — no one should look so tempting, it's not fair."

"Tempting how?" I asked. "I can change..." He sighed, shaking his head. "You are so absurd." He pressed his cool lips delicately to my forehead, and the room spun. The smell of his breath made it impossible to think.

"Shall I explain how you are tempting me?" he said. It was clearly a rhetorical question. His fingers traced slowly down my spine, his breath coming more quickly against my skin. My hands were limp on his chest, and I felt lightheaded again. He tilted his head slowly and touched his cool lips to mine for the second time, very carefully, parting them slightly. And then I collapsed.

"Bella?" His voice was alarmed as he caught me and held me up.

"You… made… me… faint," I accused him dizzily.

"What am I going to do with you?" he groaned in exasperation. "Yesterday I kiss you, and you attack me! Today you pass out on me!" I laughed weakly, letting his arms support me while my head spun.

"So much for being good at everything," he sighed.

"That's the problem." I was still dizzy. "You're too good. Far, far too good."

"Do you feel sick?" he asked; he'd seen me like this before.

"No — that wasn't the same kind of fainting at all. I don't know what happened." I shook my head apologeticallv, "I think I forgot to breathe."

"I can't take you anywhere like this."

"I'm fine," I insisted. "Your family is going to think I'm insane anyway, what's the difference?"

He measured my expression for a moment. "I'm very partial to that color with your skin," he offered unexpectedly. I flushed with pleasure, and looked away.

"Look, I'm trying really hard not to think about what I'm about to do, so can we go already?" I asked.

"And you're worried, not because you're headed to meet a houseful of vampires, but because you think those vampires won't approve of you, correct?"

"That's right," I answered immediately, hiding my surprise at his casual use of the word.

He shook his head. "You're incredible."

I realized, as he drove my truck out of the main part of town, that I had no idea where he lived. We passed over the bridge at the Calawah River, the road winding northward, the houses flashing past us growing farther apart, getting bigger. And then we were past the other houses altogether, driving through misty forest. I was trying to decide whether to ask or be patient, when he turned abruptly onto an unpaved road. It was unmarked, barely visible among the ferns. The forest encroached on both sides, leaving the road ahead only discernible for a few meters as it twisted, serpentlike, around the ancient trees.

And then, after a few miles, there was some thinning of the woods, and we were suddenly in a small meadow, or was it actually a lawn? The gloom of the forest didn't relent, though, for there were six primordial cedars that shaded an entire acre with

their vast sweep of branches. The trees held their protecting shadow right up to the walls of the house that rose among them, making obsolete the deep porch that wrapped around the first story.

I don't know what I had expected, but it definitely wasn't this. The house was timeless, graceful, and probably a hundred years old. It was painted a soft, faded white, three stories tall, rectangular and well proportioned. The windows and doors were either part of the original structure or a perfect restoration. My truck was the only car in sight. I could hear the river close by, hidden in the obscurity of the forest.

"Wow."

"You like it?" He smiled.

"It… has a certain charm."

He pulled the end of my ponytail and chuckled.

"Ready?" he asked, opening my door.

"Not even a little bit — let's go." I tried to laugh, but it seemed to get stuck in my throat. I smoothed my hair nervously.

"You look lovely." He took my hand easily, without thinking about it. We walked through the deep shade up to the porch. I knew he could feel my tension; his thumb rubbed soothing circles into the back of my hand. He opened the door for me.

The inside was even more surprising, less predictable, than the exterior. It was very bright, very open, and very large. This must have originally been several

rooms, but the walls had been removed from most of the first floor to create one wide space. The back, south-facing wall had been entirely replaced with glass, and, beyond the shade of the cedars, the lawn stretched bare to the wide river. A massive curving staircase dominated the west side of the room. The walls, the high-beamed ceiling, the wooden floors, and the thick carpets were all varying shades of white. Waiting to greet us, standing just to the left of the door, on a raised portion of the floor by a spectacular grand piano, were Edward's parents. I'd seen Dr. Cullen before, of course, yet I couldn't help but be struck again by his youth, his outrageous perfection. At his side was Esme, I assumed, the only one of the family I'd never seen before. She had the same pale, beautiful features as the rest of them. Something about her heart-shaped face, her billows of soft, caramel-colored hair, reminded me of the ingénues of the silent-movie era. She was small, slender, yet less angular, more rounded than the others. They were both dressed casually, in light colors that matched the inside of the house. They smiled in welcome, but made no move to approach us. Trying not to frighten me, I guessed.

"Carlisle, Esme," Edward's voice broke the short silence, "this is Bella."

"You're very welcome, Bella." Carlisle's step was measured, careful as he approached me. He raised his hand tentatively, and I stepped forward to shake hands with him.

"It's nice to see you again, Dr. Cullen."

"Please, call me Carlisle."

"Carlisle." I grinned at him, my sudden confidence surprising me. I could feel Edward's relief at my side.

Esme smiled and stepped forward as well, reaching for my hand. Her cold, stone grasp was just as I expected.

"It's very nice to know you," she said sincerely.

"Thank you. I'm glad to meet you, too." And I was. It was like meeting a fairy tale — Snow White, in the flesh.

"Where are Alice and Jasper?" Edward asked, but no one answered, as they had just appeared at the top of the wide staircase.

"Hey, Edward!" Alice called enthusiastically. She ran down the stairs, a streak of black hair and white skin, coming to a sudden and graceful stop in front of me. Carlisle and Esme shot warning glances at her, but I liked it. It was natural — for her, anyway.

"Hi, Bella!" Alice said, and she bounced forward to kiss my cheek. If Carlisle and Esme had looked cautious before, they now looked staggered. There was shock in my eyes, too, but I was also very pleased that she seemed to approve of me so entirely. I was startled to feel Edward stiffen at my side. I glanced at his face, but his expression was unreadable.

"You do smell nice, I never noticed before," she commented, to my extreme embarrassment.

No one else seemed to know quite what to say, and then Jasper was there —

tall and leonine. A feeling of ease spread through me, and I was suddenly comfortable despite where I was. Edward stared at Jasper, raising one eyebrow, and I remembered what Jasper could do.

"Hello, Bella," Jasper said. He kept his distance, not offering to shake my hand. But it was impossible to feel awkward near him.

"Hello, Jasper." I smiled at him shyly, and then at the others. "It's nice to meet you all — you have a very beautiful home," I added conventionally.

"Thank you," Esme said. "We're so glad that you came." She spoke with feeling, and I realized that she thought I was brave.

I also realized that Rosalie and Emmett were nowhere to be seen, and I remembered Edward's too-innocent denial when I'd asked him if the others didn't like me.

Carlisle's expression distracted me from this train of thought; he was gazing meaningfully at Edward with an intense expression. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Edward nod once.

I looked away, trying to be polite. My eyes wandered again to the beautiful instrument on the platform by the door. I suddenly remembered my childhood fantasy that, should I ever win a lottery, I would buy a grand piano for my mother. She wasn't really good — she only played for herself on our secondhand upright — but I loved to watch her play. She was happy,

absorbed — she seemed like a new, mysterious being to me then, someone outside the "mom" persona I took for granted. She'd put me through lessons, of course, but like most kids, I whined until she let me quit.

Esme noticed my preoccupation.

"Do you play?" she asked, inclining her head toward the piano. I shook my head. "Not at all. But it's so beautiful. Is it yours?"

"No," she laughed. "Edward didn't tell you he was musical?"

"No." I glared at his suddenly innocent expression with narrowed eyes. "I should have known, I guess."

Esme raised her delicate eyebrows in confusion.

"Edward can do everything, right?" I explained. Jasper snickered and Esme gave Edward a reproving look.

"I hope you haven't been showing off— it's rude," she scolded.

"Just a bit," he laughed freely. Her face softened at the sound, and they shared a brief look that I didn't understand, though Esme's face seemed almost smug.

"He's been too modest, actually," I corrected.

"Well, play for her," Esme encouraged.

"You just said showing off was rude," he objected.

"There are exceptions to every rule," she replied.

"I'd like to hear you play," I volunteered.

"It's settled then." Esme pushed him toward the piano. He pulled me along, sitting me on the bench beside him.

He gave me a long, exasperated look before he turned to the keys. And then his fingers flowed swiftly across the ivory, and the room was filled with a composition so complex, so luxuriant, it was impossible to believe only one set of hands played. I felt my chin drop, my mouth open in astonishment, and heard low chuckles behind me at my reaction. Edward looked at me casually, the music still surging around us without a break, and winked. "Do you like it?"

"You wrote this?" I gasped, understanding.

He nodded. "It's Esme's favorite."

I closed my eyes, shaking my head.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm feeling extremely insignificant."

The music slowed, transforming into something softer, and to my surprise I detected the melody of his lullaby weaving through the profusion of notes.

"You inspired this one," he said softly. The music grew unbearably sweet. I couldn't speak.

"They like you, you know," he said conversationally. "Esme especially." I glanced behind me, but the huge room was empty now.

"Where did they go?"

"Very subtly giving us some privacy, I suppose." I sighed. "They like me. But Rosalie and Emmett..." I trailed off, not sure how to express my doubts.

He frowned. "Don't worry about Rosalie," he said, his eyes wide and persuasive. "She'll come around."

I pursed my lips skeptically. "Emmett?"

"Well, he thinks I'm a lunatic, it's true, but he doesn't have a problem with you. He's trying to reason with Rosalie."

"What is it that upsets her?" I wasn't sure if I wanted to know the answer.

He sighed deeply. "Rosalie struggles the most with... with what we are. It's hard for her to have someone on the outside know the truth. And she's a little jealous."

"Rosalie is jealous of me?" I asked incredulously. I tried to imagine a universe in which someone as breathtaking as Rosalie would have any possible reason to feel jealous of someone like me.

"You're human." He shrugged. "She wishes that she were, too."

"Oh," I muttered, still stunned. "Even Jasper, though..."

"That's really my fault," he said. "I told you he was the most recent to try our way of life. I warned him to

keep his distance." I thought about the reason for that, and shuddered.

"Esme and Carlisle... ?" I continued quickly, to keep him from noticing.

"Are happy to see me happy. Actually, Esme wouldn't care if you had a third eye and webbed feet. All this time she's been worried about me, afraid that there was something missing from my essential makeup, that I was too young when Carlisle changed me... She's ecstatic. Every time I touch you, she just about chokes with satisfaction."

"Alice seems very... enthusiastic."

"Alice has her own way of looking at things," he said through tight lips.

"And you're not going to explain that, are you?" A moment of wordless communication passed between us. He realized that I knew he was keeping something from me. I realized that he wasn't going to give anything away. Not now.

"So what was Carlisle telling you before?"

His eyebrows pulled together. "You noticed that, did you?" I shrugged. "Of course."

He looked at me thoughtfully for a few seconds before answering. "He wanted to tell me some news — he didn't know if it was something I would share with you."

"Will you?"

"I have to, because I'm going to be a little... overbearingly protective over the next few days — or weeks — and I wouldn't want you to think I'm naturally a tyrant."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, exactly. Alice just sees some visitors coming soon. They know we're here, and they're curious."

"Visitors?"

"Yes... well, they aren't like us, of course — in their hunting habits, I mean. They probably won't come into town at all, but I'm certainly not going to let you out of my sight till they're gone." I shivered.

"Finally, a rational response!" he murmured. "I was beginning to think you had no sense of self-preservation at all."

I let that one pass, looking away, my eyes wandering again around the spacious room.

He followed my gaze. "Not what you expected, is it?" he asked, his voice smug.

"No," I admitted.

"No coffins, no piled skulls in the corners; I don't even think we have cobwebs... what a disappointment this must be for you," he continued slyly. I ignored his teasing. "It's so light... so open." He was more serious when he answered. "It's the one place we never have to hide."

The song he was still playing, my song, drifted to an end, the final chords shifting to a more melancholy key. The last note hovered poignantly in the silence.

"Thank you," I murmured. I realized there were tears in my eyes. I dabbed at them, embarrassed.

He touched the corner of my eye, trapping one I missed. He lifted his finger, examining the drop of moisture broodingly. Then, so quickly I couldn't be positive that he really did, he put his finger to his mouth to taste it.

I looked at him questioningly, and he gazed back for a long moment before he finally smiled.

"Do you want to see the rest of the house?"

"No coffins?" I verified, the sarcasm in my voice not entirely masking the slight but genuine anxiety I felt.

He laughed, taking my hand, leading me away from the piano.

"No coffins," he promised.

We walked up the massive staircase, my hand trailing along the satin-smooth rail. The long hall at the top of the stairs was paneled with a honey-colored wood, the same as the floorboards.

"Rosalie and Emmett's room… Carlisle's office… Alice's room…" He gestured as he led me past the doors.

He would have continued, but I stopped dead at the end of the hall, staring incredulously at the ornament

hanging on the wall above my head. Edward chuckled at my bewildered expression.

"You can laugh," he said. "It is sort of ironic." I didn't laugh. My hand raised automatically, one finger extended as if to touch the large wooden cross, its dark patina contrasting with the lighter tone of the wall. I didn't touch it, though I was curious if the aged wood would feel as silky as it looked.

"It must be very old," I guessed.

He shrugged. "Early sixteen-thirties, more or less." I looked away from the cross to stare at him.

"Why do you keep this here?" I wondered.

"Nostalgia. It belonged to Carlisle's father."

"He collected antiques?" I suggested doubtfully.

"No. He carved this himself. It hung on the wall above the pulpit in the vicarage where he preached."

I wasn't sure if my face betrayed my shock, but I returned to gazing at the simple, ancient cross, just in case. I quickly did the mental math; the cross was over three hundred and seventy years old. The silence stretched on as I struggled to wrap my mind around the concept of so many years.

"Are you all right?" He sounded worried.

"How old is Carlisle?" I asked quietly, ignoring his question, still staring up.

"He just celebrated his three hundred and sixty-second birthday," Edward said. I looked back at him,

a million questions in my eyes. He watched me carefully as he spoke.

"Carlisle was born in London, in the sixteen-forties, he believes. Time wasn't marked as accurately then, for the common people anyway. It was just before Cromwell's rule, though."

I kept my face composed, aware of his scrutiny as I listened. It was easier if I didn't try to believe.

"He was the only son of an Anglican pastor. His mother died giving birth to him. His father was an intolerant man. As the Protestants came into power, he was enthusiastic in his persecution of Roman Catholics and other religions. He also believed very strongly in the reality of evil. He led hunts for witches, werewolves... and vampires." I grew very still at the word. I'm sure he noticed, but he went on without pausing.

"They burned a lot of innocent people — of course the real creatures that he sought were not so easy to catch.

"When the pastor grew old, he placed his obedient son in charge of the raids. At first Carlisle was a disappointment; he was not quick to accuse, to see demons where they did not exist. But he was persistent, and more clever than his father. He actually discovered a coven of true vampires that lived hidden in the sewers of the city, only coming out by night to hunt. In those days, when monsters were not just myths and legends, that was the way many lived.

"The people gathered their pitchforks and torches, of course" — his brief laugh was darker now — "and waited where Carlisle had seen the monsters exit into the street. Eventually one emerged."

His voice was very quiet; I strained to catch the words.

"He must have been ancient, and weak with hunger. Carlisle heard him call out in Latin to the others when he caught the scent of the mob. He ran through the streets, and Carlisle — he was twenty-three and very fast —

was in the lead of the pursuit. The creature could have easily outrun them, but Carlisle thinks he was too hungry, so he turned and attacked. He fell on Carlisle first, but the others were close behind, and he turned to defend himself. He killed two men, and made off with a third, leaving Carlisle bleeding in the street."

He paused. I could sense he was editing something, keeping something from me.

"Carlisle knew what his father would do. The bodies would be burned —

anything infected by the monster must be destroyed. Carlisle acted instinctively to save his own life. He crawled away from the alley while the mob followed the fiend and his victim. He hid in a cellar, buried himself in rotting potatoes for three days. It's a miracle he was able to keep silent, to stay undiscovered.

"It was over then, and he realized what he had become." I'm not sure what my face was revealing, but he suddenly broke off.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"I'm fine," I assured him. And, though I bit my lip in hesitation, he must have seen the curiosity burning in my eyes.

He smiled. "I expect you have a few more questions for me."

"A few."

His smile widened over his brilliant teeth. He started back down the hall, pulling me along by the hand. "Come on, then," he encouraged. "I'll show you."

# Chapter 16

## CARLISLE

He led me back to the room that he'd pointed out as Carlisle's office. He paused outside the door for an instant.

"Come in," Carlisle's voice invited.

Edward opened the door to a high-ceilinged room with tall, west-facing windows. The walls were paneled again, in a darker wood — where they were visible. Most of the wall space was taken up by towering bookshelves that reached high above my head and held more books than I'd ever seen outside a library.

Carlisle sat behind a huge mahogany desk in a leather chair. He was just placing a bookmark in the pages of the thick volume he held. The room was how I'd always imagined a college dean's would look — only Carlisle looked too young to fit the part.

"What can I do for you?" he asked us pleasantly, rising from his seat.

"I wanted to show Bella some of our history," Edward said. "Well, your history, actually."

"We didn't mean to disturb you," I apologized.

"Not at all. Where are you going to start?"

"The Waggoner," Edward replied, placing one hand lightly on my shoulder and spinning me around to look back toward the door we'd just come through.

Every time he touched me, in even the most casual way, my heart had an audible reaction. It was more embarrassing with Carlisle there. The wall we faced now was different from the others. Instead of bookshelves, this wall was crowded with framed pictures of all sizes, some in vibrant colors, others dull monochromes. I searched for some logic, some binding motif the collection had in common, but I found nothing in my hasty examination.

Edward pulled me toward the far left side, standing me in front of a small square oil painting in a plain wooden frame. This one did not stand out among the bigger and brighter pieces; painted in varying tones of sepia, it depicted a miniature city full of steeply slanted roofs, with thin spires atop a few scattered towers. A wide river filled the foreground, crossed by a bridge covered with structures that looked like tiny cathedrals.

"London in the sixteen-fifties," Edward said.

"The London of my youth," Carlisle added, from a few feet behind us. I flinched; I hadn't heard him approach. Edward squeezed my hand.

"Will you tell the story?" Edward asked. I twisted a little to see Carlisle's reaction.

He met my glance and smiled. "I would," he replied. "But I'm actually running a bit late. The hospital called this morning — Dr. Snow is taking a sick day. Besides, you know the stories as well as I do," he added, grinning at Edward now.

It was a strange combination to absorb — the everyday concerns of the town doctor stuck in the middle of a discussion of his early days in seventeenth-century London.

It was also unsettling to know that he spoke aloud only for my benefit. After another warm smile for me, Carlisle left the room.

I stared at the little picture of Carlisle's hometown for a long moment.

"What happened then?" I finally asked, staring up at Edward, who was watching me. "When he realized what had happened to him?" He glanced back to the paintings, and I looked to see which image caught his interest now. It was a larger landscape in dull fall colors — an empty, shadowed meadow in a forest, with a craggy peak in the distance.

"When he knew what he had become," Edward said quietly, "he rebelled against it. He tried to destroy himself. But that's not easily done."

"How?" I didn't mean to say it aloud, but the word broke through my shock.

"He jumped from great heights," Edward told me, his voice impassive. "He tried to drown himself in the ocean… but he was young to the new life, and very strong. It is amazing that he was able to resist… feeding… while he was still so new. The instinct is more powerful then, it takes over everything. But he was so repelled by himself that he had the strength to try to kill himself with starvation."

"Is that possible?" My voice was faint.

"No, there are very few ways we can be killed." I opened my mouth to ask, but he spoke before I could.

"So he grew very hungry, and eventually weak. He strayed as far as he could from the human populace, recognizing that his willpower was weakening, too. For months he wandered by night, seeking the loneliest places, loathing himself.

"One night, a herd of deer passed his hiding place. He was so wild with thirst that he attacked without a thought. His strength returned and he realized there was an alternative to being the vile monster he feared. Had he not eaten venison in his former life? Over the next months his new philosophy was born. He could exist without being a demon. He found himself again.

"He began to make better use of his time. He'd always been intelligent, eager to learn. Now he had unlimited time before him. He studied by night, planned by day. He swam to France and —"

"He swam to France?"

"People swim the Channel all the time, Bella," he reminded me patiently.

"That's true, I guess. It just sounded funny in that context. Go on."

"Swimming is easy for us —"

"Everything is easy for you," I griped.

He waited, his expression amused.

"I won't interrupt again, I promise."

He chuckled darkly, and finished his sentence. "Because, technically, we don't need to breathe."

"You —"

"No, no, you promised." He laughed, putting his cold finger lightly to my lips. "Do you want to hear the story or not?"

"You can't spring something like that on me, and then expect me not to say anything," I mumbled against his finger.

He lifted his hand, moving it to rest against my neck. The speed of my heart reacted to that, but I persisted.

"You don't have to breathe?" I demanded.

"No, it's not necessary. Just a habit." He shrugged.

"How long can you go... without breathing?"

"Indefinitely, I suppose; I don't know. It gets a bit uncomfortable —

being without a sense of smell."

"A bit uncomfortable," I echoed.

I wasn't paying attention to my own expression, but something in it made him grow somber. His hand dropped to his side and he stood very still, his eyes intent on my face. The silence lengthened. His features were immobile as stone.

"What is it?" I whispered, touching his frozen face. His face softened under my hand, and he sighed. "I keep waiting for it to happen."

"For what to happen?"

"I know that at some point, something I tell you or something you see is going to be too much. And then you'll run away from me, screaming as you go." He smiled half a smile, but his eyes were serious. "I won't stop you. I want this to happen, because I want you to be safe. And yet, I want to be with you. The two desires are impossible to reconcile..." He trailed off, staring at my face. Waiting.

"I'm not running anywhere," I promised.

"We'll see," he said, smiling again.

I frowned at him. "So, go on — Carlisle was swimming to France." He paused, getting back into his story. Reflexively, his eyes flickered to another picture — the most colorful of them all, the most ornately framed, and the largest; it was twice as wide as the door it hung next to. The canvas overflowed with bright figures in swirling robes, writhing around long pillars and off marbled balconies. I couldn't tell if it represented Greek mythology, or if the characters floating in the clouds above were meant to be biblical.

"Carlisle swam to France, and continued on through Europe, to the universities there. By night he studied music, science, medicine — and found his calling, his penance, in that, in saving human lives." His expression became awed, almost reverent. "I can't adequately describe the struggle; it took Carlisle two

centuries of torturous effort to perfect his self-control. Now he is all but immune to the scent of human blood, and he is able to do the work he loves without agony. He finds a great deal of peace there, at the hospital..." Edward stared off into space for a long moment. Suddenly he seemed to recall his purpose. He tapped his finger against the huge painting in front of us.

"He was studying in Italy when he discovered the others there. They were much more civilized and educated than the wraiths of the London sewers." He touched a comparatively sedate quartet of figures painted on the highest balcony, looking down calmly on the mayhem below them. I examined the grouping carefully and realized, with a startled laugh, that I recognized the golden-haired man.

"Solimena was greatly inspired by Carlisle's friends. He often painted them as gods," Edward chuckled. "Aro, Marcus, Caius," he said, indicating the other three, two black-haired, one snowy-white. "Nighttime patrons of the arts."

"What happened to them?" I wondered aloud, my fingertip hovering a centimeter from the figures on the canvas.

"They're still there." He shrugged. "As they have been for who knows how many millennia. Carlisle stayed with them only for a short time, just a few decades. He greatly admired their civility, their refinement, but they persisted in trying to cure his aversion to 'his natural food source,' as they called it. They tried to persuade him, and he tried to persuade them, to no

avail. At that point, Carlisle decided to try the New World. He dreamed of finding others like himself. He was very lonely, you see.

"He didn't find anyone for a long time. But, as monsters became the stuff of fairy tales, he found he could interact with unsuspecting humans as if he were one of them. He began practicing medicine. But the companionship he craved evaded him; he couldn't risk familiarity.

"When the influenza epidemic hit, he was working nights in a hospital in Chicago. He'd been turning over an idea in his mind for several years, and he had almost decided to act — since he couldn't find a companion, he would create one. He wasn't absolutely sure how his own transformation had occurred, so he was hesitant. And he was loath to steal anyone's life the way his had been stolen. It was in that frame of mind that he found me. There was no hope for me; I was left in a ward with the dying. He had nursed my parents, and knew I was alone. He decided to try..." His voice, nearly a whisper now, trailed off. He stared unseeingly through the west windows. I wondered which images filled his mind now, Carlisle's memories or his own. I waited quietly.

When he turned back to me, a gentle angel's smile lit his expression.

"And so we've come full circle," he concluded.

"Have you always stayed with Carlisle, then?" I wondered.

"Almost always." He put his hand lightly on my waist and pulled me with him as he walked through the door. I stared back at the wall of pictures, wondering if I would ever get to hear the other stories.

Edward didn't say any more as we walked down the hall, so I asked,

"Almost?"

He sighed, seeming reluctant to answer. "Well, I had a typical bout of rebellious adolescence — about ten years after I was... born... created, whatever you want to call it. I wasn't sold on his life of abstinence, and I resented him for curbing my appetite. So I went off on my own for a time."

"Really?" I was intrigued, rather than frightened, as I perhaps should have been.

He could tell. I vaguely realized that we were headed up the next flight of stairs, but I wasn't paying much attention to my surroundings.

"That doesn't repulse you?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I guess... it sounds reasonable."

He barked a laugh, more loudly than before. We were at the top of the stairs now, in another paneled hallway.

"From the time of my new birth," he murmured, "I had the advantage of knowing what everyone around

me was thinking, both human and non-human alike. That's why it took me ten years to defy Carlisle — I could read his perfect sincerity, understand exactly why he lived the way he did.

"It took me only a few years to return to Carlisle and recommit to his vision. I thought I would be exempt from the… depression… that accompanies a conscience. Because I knew the thoughts of my prey, I could pass over the innocent and pursue only the evil. If I followed a murderer down a dark alley where he stalked a young girl — if I saved her, then surely I wasn't so terrible."

I shivered, imagining only too clearly what he described — the alley at night, the frightened girl, the dark man behind her. And Edward, Edward as he hunted, terrible and glorious as a young god, unstoppable. Would she have been grateful, that girl, or more frightened than before?

"But as time went on, I began to see the monster in my eyes. I couldn't escape the debt of so much human life taken, no matter how justified. And I went back to Carlisle and Esme. They welcomed me back like the prodigal. It was more than I deserved."

We'd come to a stop in front of the last door in the hall.

"My room," he informed me, opening it and pulling me through. His room faced south, with a wall-sized window like the great room below. The whole back side of the house must be glass. His view looked down on the winding Sol Duc River, across the untouched forest to the Olympic Mountain range. The mountains

were much closer than I would have believed. The western wall was completely covered with shelf after shelf of CDs. His room was better stocked than a music store. In the corner was a sophisticated-looking sound system, the kind I was afraid to touch because I'd be sure to break something. There was no bed, only a wide and inviting black leather sofa. The floor was covered with a thick golden carpet, and the walls were hung with heavy fabric in a slightly darker shade.

"Good acoustics?" I guessed.

He chuckled and nodded.

He picked up a remote and turned the stereo on. It was quiet, but the soft jazz number sounded like the band was in the room with us. I went to look at his mind-boggling music collection.

"How do you have these organized?" I asked, unable to find any rhyme or reason to the titles.

He wasn't paying attention.

"Ummm, by year, and then by personal preference within that frame," he said absently.

I turned, and he was looking at me with a peculiar expression in his eyes.

"What?"

"I was prepared to feel... relieved. Having you know about everything, not needing to keep secrets from you. But I didn't expect to feel more than that. I like

it. It makes me… happy." He shrugged, smiling slightly.

"I'm glad," I said, smiling back. I'd worried that he might regret telling me these things. It was good to know that wasn't the case. But then, as his eyes dissected my expression, his smile faded and his forehead creased.

"You're still waiting for the running and the screaming, aren't you?" I guessed.

A faint smile touched his lips, and he nodded.

"I hate to burst your bubble, but you're really not as scary as you think you are. I don't find you scary at all, actually," I lied casually. He stopped, raising his eyebrows in blatant disbelief. Then he flashed a wide, wicked smile.

"You really shouldn't have said that," he chuckled. He growled, a low sound in the back of his throat; his lips curled back over his perfect teeth. His body shifted suddenly, half-crouched, tensed like a lion about to pounce.

I backed away from him, glaring.

"You wouldn't."

I didn't see him leap at me — it was much too fast. I only found myself suddenly airborne, and then we crashed onto the sofa, knocking it into the wall. All the while, his arms formed an iron cage of protection around me — I was barely jostled. But I still was gasping as I tried to right myself.

He wasn't having that. He curled me into a ball against his chest, holding me more securely than iron chains. I glared at him in alarm, but he seemed well in control, his jaw relaxed as he grinned, his eyes bright only with humor.

"You were saying?" he growled playfully.

"That you are a very, very terrifying monster," I said, my sarcasm marred a bit by my breathless voice.

"Much better," he approved.

"Um." I struggled. "Can I get up now?" He just laughed.

"Can we come in?" a soft voice sounded from the hall. I struggled to free myself, but Edward merely readjusted me so that I was somewhat more conventionally seated on his lap. I could see it was Alice, then, and Jasper behind her in the doorway. My cheeks burned, but Edward seemed at ease.

"Go ahead." Edward was still chuckling quietly. Alice seemed to find nothing unusual in our embrace; she walked — almost danced, her movements were so graceful — to the center of the room, where she folded herself sinuously onto the floor. Jasper, however, paused at the door, his expression a trifle shocked. He stared at Edward's face, and I wondered if he was tasting the atmosphere with his unusual sensitivity.

"It sounded like you were having Bella for lunch, and we came to see if you would share," Alice announced.

I stiffened for an instant, until I realized Edward was grinning —

whether at her comment or my response, I couldn't tell.

"Sorry, I don't believe I have enough to spare," he replied, his arms holding me recklessly close.

"Actually," Jasper said, smiling despite himself as he walked into the room, "Alice says there's going to be a real storm tonight, and Emmett wants to play ball. Are you game?"

The words were all common enough, but the context confused me. I gathered that Alice was a bit more reliable than the weatherman, though. Edward's eyes lit up, but he hesitated.

"Of course you should bring Bella," Alice chirped. I thought I saw Jasper throw a quick glance at her.

"Do you want to go?" Edward asked me, excited, his expression vivid.

"Sure." I couldn't disappoint such a face. "Um, where are we going?"

"We have to wait for thunder to play ball — you'll see why," he promised.

"Will I need an umbrella?"

They all three laughed aloud.

"Will she?" Jasper asked Alice.

"No." She was positive. "The storm will hit over town. It should be dry enough in the clearing."

"Good, then." The enthusiasm in Jasper's voice was catching, naturally. I found myself eager, rather than scared stiff.

"Let's go see if Carlisle will come." Alice bounded up and to the door in a fashion that would break any ballerina's heart.

"Like you don't know," Jasper teased, and they were swiftly on their way. Jasper managed to inconspicuously close the door behind them.

"What will we be playing?" I demanded.

"You will be watching," Edward clarified. "We will be playing baseball." I rolled my eyes. "Vampires like baseball?"

"It's the American pastime," he said with mock solemnity.

# Chapter 17

## THE GAME

It was just beginning to drizzle when Edward turned onto my street. Up until that moment, I'd had no doubt that he'd be staying with me while I spent a few interim hours in the real world.

And then I saw the black car, a weathered Ford, parked in Charlie's driveway — and heard Edward mutter something unintelligible in a low, harsh voice.

Leaning away from the rain under the shallow front porch, Jacob Black stood behind his father's wheelchair. Billy's face was impassive as stone as Edward parked my truck against the curb. Jacob stared down, his expression mortified.

Edward's low voice was furious. "This is crossing the line."

"He came to warn Charlie?" I guessed, more horrified than angry. Edward just nodded, answering Billy's gaze through the rain with narrowed eyes.

I felt weak with relief that Charlie wasn't home yet.

"Let me deal with this," I suggested. Edward's black glare made me anxious.

To my surprise, he agreed. "That's probably best. Be careful, though. The child has no idea."

I bridled a little at the word child. "Jacob is not that much younger than I am," I reminded him.

He looked at me then, his anger abruptly fading. "Oh, I know," he assured me with a grin.

I sighed and put my hand on the door handle.

"Get them inside," he instructed, "so I can leave. I'll be back around dusk."

"Do you want my truck?" I offered, meanwhile wondering how I would explain its absence to Charlie.

He rolled his eyes. "I could walk home faster than this truck moves."

"You don't have to leave," I said wistfully.

He smiled at my glum expression. "Actually, I do. After you get rid of them" — he threw a dark glance in the Blacks' direction — "you still have to prepare Charlie to meet your new boyfriend." He grinned widely, showing all of his teeth.

I groaned. "Thanks a lot."

He smiled the crooked smile that I loved. "I'll be back soon," he promised. His eyes flickered back to the porch, and then he leaned in to swiftly kiss me just under the edge of my jaw. My heart lurched frantically, and I, too, glanced toward the porch. Billy's face was no longer impassive, and his hands clutched at the armrests of his chair.

"Soon," I stressed as I opened the door and stepped out into the rain. I could feel his eyes on my back as I half-ran through the light sprinkle toward the porch.

"Hey, Billy. Hi, Jacob." I greeted them as cheerfully as I could manage.

"Charlie's gone for the day — I hope you haven't been waiting long."

"Not long," Billy said in a subdued tone. His black eyes were piercing.

"I just wanted to bring this up." He indicated a brown paper sack resting in his lap.

"Thanks," I said, though I had no idea what it could be. "Why don't you come in for a minute and dry off?"

I pretended to be oblivious to his intense scrutiny as I unlocked the door, and waved them in ahead of me.

"Here, let me take that," I offered, turning to shut the door. I allowed myself one last glance at Edward. He was waiting, perfectly still, his eyes solemn.

"You'll want to put it in the fridge," Billy noted as he handed me the package. "It's some of Harry Clearwater's homemade fish fry — Charlie's favorite. The fridge keeps it drier." He shrugged.

"Thanks," I repeated, but with feeling this time. "I was running out of new ways to fix fish, and he's bound to bring home more tonight."

"Fishing again?" Billy asked with a subtle gleam in his eye. "Down at the usual spot? Maybe I'll run by and see him."

"No," I quickly lied, my face going hard. "He was headed someplace new...

but I have no idea where."

He took in my changed expression, and it made him thoughtful.

"Jake," he said, still appraising me. "Why don't you go get that new picture of Rebecca out of the car? I'll leave that for Charlie, too."

"Where is it?" Jacob asked, his voice morose. I glanced at him, but he was staring at the floor, his eyebrows pulling together.

"I think I saw it in the trunk," Billy said. "You may have to dig for it." Jacob slouched back out into the rain.

Billy and I faced each other in silence. After a few seconds, the quiet started to feel awkward, so I turned and headed to the kitchen. I could hear his wet wheels squeak against the linoleum as he followed. I shoved the bag onto the crowded top shelf of the fridge, and spun around to confront him. His deeply lined face was unreadable.

"Charlie won't be back for a long time." My voice was almost rude. He nodded in agreement, but said nothing.

"Thanks again for the fish fry," I hinted.

He continued nodding. I sighed and folded my arms across my chest. He seemed to sense that I had given up on small talk. "Bella," he said, and then he hesitated.

I waited.

"Bella," he said again, "Charlie is one of my best friends."

"Yes."

He spoke each word carefully in his rumbling voice. "I noticed you've been spending time with one of the Cullens."

"Yes," I repeated curtly.

His eyes narrowed. "Maybe it's none of my business, but I don't think that is such a good idea."

"You're right," I agreed. "It is none of your business." He raised his graying eyebrows at my tone. "You probably don't know this, but the Cullen family has an unpleasant reputation on the reservation."

"Actually, I did know that," I informed him in a hard voice. This surprised him. "But that reputation couldn't be deserved, could it?

Because the Cullens never set foot on the reservation, do they?" I could see that my less than subtle reminder of the agreement that both bound and protected his tribe pulled him up short.

"That's true," he acceded, his eyes guarded. "You seem… well informed about the Cullens. More informed than I expected."

I stared him down. "Maybe even better informed than you are." He pursed his thick lips as he considered that. "Maybe." he allowed, but his eyes were shrewd. "Is Charlie as well informed?" He had found the weak chink in my armor.

"Charlie likes the Cullens a lot," I hedged. He clearly understood my evasion. His expression was unhappy, but unsurprised.

"It's not my business," he said. "But it may be Charlie's."

"Though it would be my business, again, whether or not I think that it's Charlie's business, right?"

I wondered if he even understood my confused question as I struggled not to say anything compromising. But he seemed to. He thought about it while the rain picked up against the roof, the only sound breaking the silence.

"Yes," he finally surrendered. "I guess that's your business, too." I sighed with relief. "Thanks, Billy."

"Just think about what you're doing, Bella," he urged.

"Okay," I agreed quickly.

He frowned. "What I meant to say was, don't do what you're doing." I looked into his eyes, filled with nothing but concern for me, and there was nothing I could say.

Just then the front door banged loudly, and I jumped at the sound.

"There's no picture anywhere in that car." Jacob's complaining voice reached us before he did. The shoulders of his shirt were stained with the rain, his hair dripping, when he rounded the corner.

"Hmm," Billy grunted, suddenly detached, spinning his chair around to face his son. "I guess I left it at home."

Jacob rolled his eyes dramatically. "Great."

"Well, Bella, tell Charlie" — Billy paused before continuing — "that we stopped by, I mean."

"I will," I muttered.

Jacob was surprised. "Are we leaving already?"

"Charlie's gonna be out late," Billy explained as he rolled himself past Jacob.

"Oh." Jacob looked disappointed. "Well, I guess I'll see you later, then, Bella."

"Sure," I agreed.

"Take care," Billy warned me. I didn't answer.

Jacob helped his father out the door. I waved briefly, glancing swiftly toward my now-empty truck, and then shut the door before they were gone. I stood in the hallway for a minute, listening to the sound of their car as it backed out and drove away. I stayed where I was, waiting for the irritation and anxiety to subside. When the tension eventually faded a bit, I headed upstairs to change out of my dressy clothes. I tried on a couple of different tops, not sure what to expect tonight. As I concentrated on what was coming, what had just passed became insignificant. Now that I was removed from Jasper's and Edward's influence, I began to make up for not being terrified before. I gave up quickly on choosing an outfit —

throwing on an old flannel shirt and jeans — knowing I would be in my raincoat all night anyway. The phone rang and I sprinted downstairs to get it. There was only one voice I wanted to hear; anything else would be a disappointment. But I knew that if he wanted to talk to me, he'd probably just materialize in my room.

"Hello?" I asked, breathless.

"Bella? It's me," Jessica said.

"Oh, hey, Jess." I scrambled for a moment to come back down to reality. It felt like months rather than days since I'd spoken to Jess. "How was the dance?"

"It was so much fun!" Jessica gushed. Needing no more invitation than that, she launched into a minute-by-minute account of the previous night. I mmm'd and ahh'd at the right places, but it wasn't easy to concentrate. Jessica, Mike, the dance, the school — they all seemed strangely irrelevant at the moment. My eyes kept flashing to the window, trying to judge the degree of light behind the heavy clouds.

"Did you hear what I said, Bella?" Jess asked, irritated.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I said, Mike kissed me! Can you believe it?"

"That's wonderful, Jess," I said.

"So what did you do yesterday?" Jessica challenged, still sounding bothered by my lack of attention. Or

maybe she was upset because I hadn't asked for details.

"Nothing, really. I just hung around outside to enjoy the sun." I heard Charlie's car in the garage.

"Did you ever hear anything more from Edward Cullen?" The front door slammed and I could hear Charlie banging around under the stairs, putting his tackle away.

"Um." I hesitated, not sure what my story was anymore.

"Hi there, kiddo!" Charlie called as he walked into the kitchen. I waved at him.

Jess heard his voice. "Oh, your dad's there. Never mind — we'll talk tomorrow. See you in Trig."

"See ya, Jess." I hung up the phone.

"Hey, Dad," I said. He was scrubbing his hands in the sink. "Where's the fish?"

"I put it out in the freezer."

"I'll go grab a few pieces before they freeze — Billy dropped off some of Harry Clearwater's fish fry this afternoon." I worked to sound enthusiastic.

"He did?" Charlie's eyes lit up. "That's my favorite." Charlie cleaned up while I got dinner ready. It didn't take long till we were sitting at the table, eating in silence. Charlie was enjoying his food. I was wondering desperately how to fulfill my assignment, struggling to think of a way to broach the subject.

"What did you do with yourself today?" he asked, snapping me out of my reverie.

"Well, this afternoon I just hung out around the house..." Only the very recent part of this afternoon, actually. I tried to keep my voice upbeat, but my stomach was hollow. "And this morning I was over at the Cullens'." Charlie dropped his fork.

"Dr. Cullen's place?" he asked in astonishment. I pretended not to notice his reaction. "Yeah."

"What were you doing there?" He hadn't picked his fork back up.

"Well, I sort of have a date with Edward Cullen tonight, and he wanted to introduce me to his parents... Dad?"

It appeared that Charlie was having an aneurysm.

"Dad, are you all right?"

"You are going out with Edward Cullen?" he thundered. Uh-oh. "I thought you liked the Cullens."

"He's too old for you," he ranted.

"We're both juniors," I corrected, though he was more right than he dreamed.

"Wait..." He paused. "Which one is Edwin?"

"Edward is the youngest, the one with the reddish brown hair." The beautiful one, the godlike one...

"Oh, well, that's" — he struggled — "better, I guess. I don't like the look of that big one. I'm sure he's a nice boy and all, but he looks too...

mature for you. Is this Edwin your boyfriend?"

"It's Edward, Dad."

"Is he?"

"Sort of, I guess."

"You said last night that you weren't interested in any of the boys in town." But he picked up his fork again, so I could see the worst was over.

"Well, Edward doesn't live in town, Dad."

He gave me a disparaging look as he chewed.

"And, anyways," I continued, "it's kind of at an early stage, you know. Don't embarrass me with all the boyfriend talk, okay?"

"When is he coming over?"

"He'll be here in a few minutes."

"Where is he taking you?"

I groaned loudly. "I hope you're getting the Spanish Inquisition out of your system now. We're going to play baseball with his family." His face puckered, and then he finally chuckled. "You're playing baseball?"

"Well, I'll probably watch most of the time."

"You must really like this guy," he observed suspiciously. I sighed and rolled my eyes for his benefit.

I heard the roar of an engine pull up in front of the house. I jumped up and started cleaning my dishes.

"Leave the dishes, I can do them tonight. You baby me too much." The doorbell rang, and Charlie stalked off to answer it. I was half a step behind him.

I hadn't realized how hard it was pouring outside. Edward stood in the halo of the porch light, looking like a male model in an advertisement for raincoats.

"Come on in, Edward."

I breathed a sigh of relief when Charlie got his name right.

"Thanks, Chief Swan," Edward said in a respectful voice.

"Go ahead and call me Charlie. Here, I'll take your jacket."

"Thanks, sir."

"Have a seat there, Edward."

I grimaced.

Edward sat down fluidly in the only chair, forcing me to sit next to Chief Swan on the sofa. I quickly shot him a dirty look. He winked behind Charlie's back.

"So I hear you're getting my girl to watch baseball." Only in Washington would the fact that it was raining

buckets have no bearing at all on the playing of outdoor sports.

"Yes, sir, that's the plan." He didn't look surprised that I'd told my father the truth. He might have been listening, though.

"Well, more power to you, I guess."

Charlie laughed, and Edward joined in.

"Okay." I stood up. "Enough humor at my expense. Let's go." I walked back to the hall and pulled on my jacket. They followed.

"Not too late, Bell."

"Don't worry, Charlie, I'll have her home early," Edward promised.

"You take care of my girl, all right?"

I groaned, but they ignored me.

"She'll be safe with me, I promise, sir."

Charlie couldn't doubt Edward's sincerity, it rang in every word. I stalked out. They both laughed, and Edward followed me. I stopped dead on the porch. There, behind my truck, was a monster Jeep. Its tires were higher than my waist. There were metal guards over the headlights and tail-lights, and four large spotlights attached to the crash bar. The hardtop was shiny red.

Charlie let out a low whistle.

"Wear your seat belts," he choked out.

Edward followed me around to my side and opened the door. I gauged the distance to the seat and prepared to jump for it. He sighed, and then lifted me in with one hand. I hoped Charlie didn't notice. As he went around to the driver's side, at a normal, human pace, I tried to put on my seat belt. But there were too many buckles.

"What's all this?" I asked when he opened the door.

"It's an off-roading harness."

"Uh-oh."

I tried to find the right places for all the buckles to fit, but it wasn't going too quickly. He sighed again and reached over to help me. I was glad that the rain was too heavy to see Charlie clearly on the porch. That meant he couldn't see how Edward's hands lingered at my neck, brushed along my collarbones. I gave up trying to help him and focused on not hyperventilating.

Edward turned the key and the engine roared to life. We pulled away from the house.

"This is a... um... big Jeep you have."

"It's Emmett's. I didn't think you'd want to run the whole way."

"Where do you keep this thing?"

"We remodeled one of the outbuildings into a garage."

"Aren't you going to put on your seat belt?"

He threw me a disbelieving look.

Then something sunk in.

"Run the whole way? As in, we're still going to run part of the way?" My voice edged up a few octaves.

He grinned tightly. "You're not going to run."

"I'm going to be sick."

"Keep your eyes closed, you'll be fine."

I bit my lip, fighting the panic.

He leaned over to kiss the top of my head, and then groaned. I looked at him, puzzled.

"You smell so good in the rain," he explained.

"In a good way, or in a bad way?" I asked cautiously. He sighed. "Both, always both."

I don't know how he found his way in the gloom and downpour, but he somehow found a side road that was less of a road and more of a mountain path. For a long while conversation was impossible, because I was bouncing up and down on the seat like a jackhammer. He seemed to enjoy the ride, though, smiling hugely the whole way.

And then we came to the end of the road; the trees formed green walls on three sides of the Jeep. The rain was a mere drizzle, slowing every second, the sky brighter through the clouds.

"Sorry, Bella, we have to go on foot from here."

"You know what? I'll just wait here."

"What happened to all your courage? You were extraordinary this morning."

"I haven't forgotten the last time yet." Could it have been only yesterday?

He was around to my side of the car in a blur. He started unbuckling me.

"I'll get those, you go on ahead," I protested.

"Hmmm…" he mused as he quickly finished. "It seems I'm going to have to tamper with your memory."

Before I could react, he pulled me from the Jeep and set my feet on the ground. It was barely misting now; Alice was going to be right.

"Tamper with my memory?" I asked nervously.

"Something like that." He was watching me intently, carefully, but there was humor deep in his eyes. He placed his hands against the Jeep on either side of my head and leaned forward, forcing me to press back against the door. He leaned in even closer, his face inches from mine. I had no room to escape.

"Now," he breathed, and just his smell disturbed my thought processes,

"what exactly are you worrying about?"

"Well, um, hitting a tree —" I gulped "— and dying. And then getting sick."

He fought back a smile. Then he bent his head down and touched his cold lips softly to the hollow at the base of my throat.

"Are you still worried now?" he murmured against my skin.

"Yes." I struggled to concentrate. "About hitting trees and getting sick." His nose drew a line up the skin of my throat to the point of my chin. His cold breath tickled my skin.

"And now?" His lips whispered against my jaw.

"Trees," I gasped. "Motion sickness." He lifted his face to kiss my eyelids. "Bella, you don't really think I would hit a tree, do you?"

"No, but I might." There was no confidence in my voice. He smelled an easy victory.

He kissed slowly down my cheek, stopping just at the corner of my mouth.

"Would I let a tree hurt you?" His lips barely brushed against my trembling lower lip.

"No," I breathed. I knew there was a second part to my brilliant defense, but I couldn't quite call it back.

"You see," he said, his lips moving against mine. "There's nothing to be afraid of, is there?"

"No," I sighed, giving up.

Then he took my face in his hands almost roughly, and kissed me in earnest, his unyielding lips moving against mine.

There really was no excuse for my behavior. Obviously I knew better by now. And yet I couldn't seem to stop from reacting exactly as I had the first

time. Instead of keeping safely motionless, my arms reached up to twine tightly around his neck, and I was suddenly welded to his stone figure. I sighed, and my lips parted.

He staggered back, breaking my grip effortlessly.

"Damn it, Bella!" he broke off, gasping. "You'll be the death of me, I swear you will."

I leaned over, bracing my hands against my knees for support.

"You're indestructible," I mumbled, trying to catch my breath.

"I might have believed that before I met you. Now let's get out of here before I do something really stupid," he growled.

He threw me across his back as he had before, and I could see the extra effort it took for him to be as gentle as he was. I locked my legs around his waist and secured my arms in a choke hold around his neck.

"Don't forget to close your eyes," he warned severely. I quickly tucked my face into his shoulder blade, under my own arm, and squeezed my eyes shut.

And I could hardly tell we were moving. I could feel him gliding along beneath me, but he could have been strolling down the sidewalk, the movement was so smooth. I was tempted to peek, just to see if he was really flying through the forest like before, but I resisted. It wasn't worth that awful dizziness. I

contented myself with listening to his breath come and go evenly.

I wasn't quite sure we had stopped until he reached back and touched my hair.

"It's over, Bella."

I dared to open my eyes, and, sure enough, we were at a standstill. I stiffly unlocked my stranglehold on his body and slipped to the ground, landing on my backside.

"Oh!" I huffed as I hit the wet ground.

He stared at me incredulously, evidently not sure whether he was still too mad to find me funny. But my bewildered expression pushed him over the edge, and he broke into a roar of laughter.

I picked myself up, ignoring him as I brushed the mud and bracken off the back of my jacket. That only made him laugh harder. Annoyed, I began to stride off into the forest.

I felt his arm around my waist.

"Where are you going, Bella?"

"To watch a baseball game. You don't seem to be interested in playing anymore, but I'm sure the others will have fun without you."

"You're going the wrong way."

I turned around without looking at him, and stalked off in the opposite direction. He caught me again.

"Don't be mad, I couldn't help myself. You should have seen your face." He chuckled before he could stop himself.

"Oh, you're the only one who's allowed to get mad?" I asked, raising my eyebrows.

"I wasn't mad at you."

"'Bella, you'll be the death of me'?" I quoted sourly.

"That was simply a statement of fact."

I tried to turn away from him again, but he held me fast.

"You were mad," I insisted.

"Yes."

"But you just said —"

"That I wasn't mad at you. Can't you see that, Bella?" He was suddenly intense, all trace of teasing gone. "Don't you understand?"

"See what?" I demanded, confused by his sudden mood swing as much as his words.

"I'm never angry with you — how could I be? Brave, trusting... warm as you are."

"Then why?" I whispered, remembering the black moods that pulled him away from me, that I'd always interpreted as well-justified frustration —

frustration at my weakness, my slowness, my unruly human reactions...

He put his hands carefully on both sides of my face. "I infuriate myself," he said gently. "The way I can't seem to keep from putting you in danger. My very existence puts you at risk. Sometimes I truly hate myself. I should be stronger, I should be able to —" I placed my hand over his mouth. "Don't."

He took my hand, moving it from his lips, but holding it to his face.

"I love you," he said. "It's a poor excuse for what I'm doing, but it's still true."

It was the first time he'd said he loved me — in so many words. He might not realize it, but I certainly did.

"Now, please try to behave yourself," he continued, and he bent to softly brush his lips against mine.

I held properly still. Then I sighed.

"You promised Chief Swan that you would have me home early, remember?

We'd better get going."

"Yes, ma'am."

He smiled wistfully and released all of me but one hand. He led me a few feet through the tall, wet ferns and draping moss, around a massive hemlock tree, and we were there, on the edge of an enormous open field in the lap of the Olympic peaks. It was twice the size of any baseball stadium.

I could see the others all there; Esme, Emmett, and Rosalie, sitting on a bare outcropping of rock, were the closest to us, maybe a hundred yards away. Much farther out I could see Jasper and Alice, at least a quarter of a mile apart, appearing to throw something back and forth, but I never saw any ball. It looked like Carlisle was marking bases, but could they really be that far apart?

When we came into view, the three on the rocks rose.

Esme started toward us. Emmett followed after a long look at Rosalie's back; Rosalie had risen gracefully and strode off toward the field without a glance in our direction. My stomach quivered uneasily in response.

"Was that you we heard, Edward?" Esme asked as she approached.

"It sounded like a bear choking," Emmett clarified. I smiled hesitantly at Esme. "That was him."

"Bella was being unintentionally funny," Edward explained, quickly settling the score.

Alice had left her position and was running, or dancing, toward us. She hurtled to a fluid stop at our feet. "It's time," she announced. As soon as she spoke, a deep rumble of thunder shook the forest beyond us, and then crashed westward toward town.

"Eerie, isn't it?" Emmett said with easy familiarity, winking at me.

"Let's go." Alice reached for Emmett's hand and they darted toward the oversized field; she ran like a

gazelle. He was nearly as graceful and just as fast — yet Emmett could never be compared to a gazelle.

"Are you ready for some ball?" Edward asked, his eyes eager, bright. I tried to sound appropriately enthusiastic. "Go team!" He snickered and, after mussing my hair, bounded off after the other two. His run was more aggressive, a cheetah rather than a gazelle, and he quickly overtook them. The grace and power took my breath away.

"Shall we go down?" Esme asked in her soft, melodic voice, and I realized I was staring openmouthed after him. I quickly reassembled my expression and nodded. Esme kept a few feet between us, and I wondered if she was still being careful not to frighten me. She matched her stride to mine without seeming impatient at the pace.

"You don't play with them?" I asked shyly.

"No, I prefer to referee — I like keeping them honest," she explained.

"Do they like to cheat, then?"

"Oh yes — you should hear the arguments they get into! Actually, I hope you don't, you would think they were raised by a pack of wolves."

"You sound like my mom," I laughed, surprised.

She laughed, too. "Well, I do think of them as my children in most ways. I never could get over my mothering instincts — did Edward tell you I had lost a child?"

"No," I murmured, stunned, scrambling to understand what lifetime she was remembering.

"Yes, my first and only baby. He died just a few days after he was born, the poor tiny thing," she sighed. "It broke my heart — that's why I jumped off the cliff, you know," she added matter-of-factly.

"Edward just said you f-fell," I stammered.

"Always the gentleman." She smiled. "Edward was the first of my new sons. I've always thought of him that way, even though he's older than I, in one way at least." She smiled at me warmly. "That's why I'm so happy that he's found you, dear." The endearment sounded very natural on her lips.

"He's been the odd man out for far too long; it's hurt me to see him alone."

"You don't mind, then?" I asked, hesitant again. "That I'm... all wrong for him?"

"No." She was thoughtful. "You're what he wants. It will work out, somehow," she said, though her forehead creased with worry. Another peal of thunder began.

Esme stopped then; apparently, we'd reached the edge of the field. It looked as if they had formed teams. Edward was far out in left field, Carlisle stood between the first and second bases, and Alice held the ball, positioned on the spot that must be the pitcher's mound. Emmett was swinging an aluminum bat; it whistled almost untraceably through the air. I waited for him to approach home plate, but then I

realized, as he took his stance, that he was already there — farther from the pitcher's mound than I would have thought possible. Jasper stood several feet behind him, catching for the other team. Of course, none of them had gloves.

"All right," Esme called in a clear voice, which I knew even Edward would hear, as far out as he was. "Batter up."

Alice stood straight, deceptively motionless. Her style seemed to be stealth rather than an intimidating windup. She held the ball in both hands at her waist, and then, like the strike of a cobra, her right hand flicked out and the ball smacked into Jasper's hand.

"Was that a strike?" I whispered to Esme.

"If they don't hit it, it's a strike," she told me. Jasper hurled the ball back to Alice's waiting hand. She permitted herself a brief grin. And then her hand spun out again.

This time the bat somehow made it around in time to smash into the invisible ball. The crack of impact was shattering, thunderous; it echoed off the mountains — I immediately understood the necessity of the thunderstorm.

The ball shot like a meteor above the field, flying deep into the surrounding forest.

"Home run," I murmured.

"Wait," Esme cautioned, listening intently, one hand raised. Emmett was a blur around the bases, Carlisle shadowing him. I realized Edward was missing.

"Out!" Esme cried in a clear voice. I stared in disbelief as Edward sprang from the fringe of the trees, ball in his upraised hand, his wide grin visible even to me.

"Emmett hits the hardest," Esme explained, "but Edward runs the fastest." The inning continued before my incredulous eyes. It was impossible to keep up with the speed at which the ball flew, the rate at which their bodies raced around the field.

I learned the other reason they waited for a thunderstorm to play when Jasper, trying to avoid Edward's infallible fielding, hit a ground ball toward Carlisle. Carlisle ran into the ball, and then raced Jasper to first base. When they collided, the sound was like the crash of two massive falling boulders. I jumped up in concern, but they were somehow unscathed.

"Safe," Esme called in a calm voice.

Emmett's team was up by one — Rosalie managed to flit around the bases after tagging up on one of Emmett's long flies — when Edward caught the third out. He sprinted to my side, sparkling with excitement.

"What do you think?" he asked.

"One thing's for sure, I'll never be able to sit through dull old Major League Baseball again."

"And it sounds like you did so much of that before," he laughed.

"I am a little disappointed," I teased.

"Why?" he asked, puzzled.

"Well, it would be nice if I could find just one thing you didn't do better than everyone else on the planet."

He flashed his special crooked smile, leaving me breathless.

"I'm up," he said, heading for the plate.

He played intelligently, keeping the ball low, out of the reach of Rosalie's always-ready hand in the outfield, gaining two bases like lightning before Emmett could get the ball back in play. Carlisle knocked one so far out of the field — with a boom that hurt my ears — that he and Edward both made it in. Alice slapped them dainty high fives. The score constantly changed as the game continued, and they razzed each other like any street ballplayers as they took turns with the lead. Occasionally Esme would call them to order. The thunder rumbled on, but we stayed dry, as Alice had predicted.

Carlisle was up to bat, Edward catching, when Alice suddenly gasped. My eyes were on Edward, as usual, and I saw his head snap up to look at her. Their eyes met and something flowed between them in an instant. He was at my side before the others could ask Alice what was wrong.

"Alice?" Esme's voice was tense.

"I didn't see — I couldn't tell," she whispered. All the others were gathered by this time.

"What is it, Alice?" Carlisle asked with the calm voice of authority.

"They were traveling much quicker than I thought. I can see I had the perspective wrong before," she murmured.

Jasper leaned over her, his posture protective. "What changed?" he asked.

"They heard us playing, and it changed their path," she said, contrite, as if she felt responsible for whatever had frightened her. Seven pairs of quick eyes flashed to my face and away.

"How soon?" Carlisle said, turning toward Edward. A look of intense concentration crossed his face.

"Less than five minutes. They're running — they want to play." He scowled.

"Can you make it?" Carlisle asked him, his eyes flicking toward me again.

"No, not carrying —" He cut short. "Besides, the last thing we need is for them to catch the scent and start hunting."

"How many?" Emmett asked Alice.

"Three," she answered tersely.

"Three!" he scoffed. "Let them come." The steel bands of muscle flexed along his massive arms.

For a split second that seemed much longer than it really was, Carlisle deliberated. Only Emmett seemed unperturbed; the rest stared at Carlisle's face with anxious eyes.

"Let's just continue the game," Carlisle finally decided. His voice was cool and level. "Alice said they were simply curious." All this was said in a flurry of words that lasted only a few seconds. I had listened carefully and caught most of it, though I couldn't hear what Esme now asked Edward with a silent vibration of her lips. I only saw the slight shake of his head and the look of relief on her face.

"You catch, Esme," he said. "I'll call it now." And he planted himself in front of me.

The others returned to the field, warily sweeping the dark forest with their sharp eyes. Alice and Esme seemed to orient themselves around where I stood.

"Take your hair down," Edward said in a low, even voice. I obediently slid the rubber band out of my hair and shook it out around me.

I stated the obvious. "The others are coming now."

"Yes, stay very still, keep quiet, and don't move from my side, please." He hid the stress in his voice well, but I could hear it. He pulled my long hair forward, around my face.

"That won't help," Alice said softly. "I could smell her across the field."

"I know." A hint of frustration colored his tone. Carlisle stood at the plate, and the others joined the game halfheartedly.

"What did Esme ask you?" I whispered.

He hesitated for a second before he answered. "Whether they were thirsty," he muttered unwillingly.

The seconds ticked by; the game progressed with apathy now. No one dared to hit harder than a bunt, and Emmett, Rosalie, and Jasper hovered in the infield. Now and again, despite the fear that numbed my brain, I was aware of Rosalie's eyes on me. They were expressionless, but something about the way she held her mouth made me think she was angry. Edward paid no attention to the game at all, eyes and mind ranging the forest.

"I'm sorry, Bella," he muttered fiercely. "It was stupid, irresponsible, to expose you like this. I'm so sorry."

I heard his breath stop, and his eyes zeroed in on right field. He took a half step, angling himself between me and what was coming. Carlisle, Emmett, and the others turned in the same direction, hearing sounds of passage much too faint for my ears.

# Chapter 18

## THE HUNT

They emerged one by one from the forest edge, ranging a dozen meters apart. The first male into the clearing fell back immediately, allowing the other male to take the front, orienting himself around the tall, dark-haired man in a manner that clearly displayed who led the pack. The third was a woman; from this distance, all I could see of her was that her hair was a startling shade of red.

They closed ranks before they continued cautiously toward Edward's family, exhibiting the natural respect of a troop of predators as it encounters a larger, unfamiliar group of its own kind.

As they approached, I could see how different they were from the Cullens. Their walk was catlike, a gait that seemed constantly on the edge of shifting into a crouch. They dressed in the ordinary gear of backpackers: jeans and casual button-down shirts in heavy, weatherproof fabrics. The clothes were frayed, though, with wear, and they were barefoot. Both men had cropped hair, but the woman's brilliant orange hair was filled with leaves and debris from the woods.

Their sharp eyes carefully took in the more polished, urbane stance of Carlisle, who, flanked by Emmett and Jasper, stepped guardedly forward to meet them. Without any seeming communication between them, they each straightened into a more casual, erect bearing.

The man in front was easily the most beautiful, his skin olive-toned beneath the typical pallor, his hair a glossy black. He was of a medium build, hard-muscled, of course, but nothing next to Emmett's brawn. He smiled an easy smile, exposing a flash of gleaming white teeth. The woman was wilder, her eyes shifting restlessly between the men facing her, and the loose grouping around me, her chaotic hair quivering in the slight breeze. Her posture was distinctly feline. The second male hovered unobtrusively behind them, slighter than the leader, his light brown hair and regular features both nondescript. His eyes, though completely still, somehow seemed the most vigilant.

Their eyes were different, too. Not the gold or black I had come to expect, but a deep burgundy color that was disturbing and sinister. The dark-haired man, still smiling, stepped toward Carlisle.

"We thought we heard a game," he said in a relaxed voice with the slightest of French accents. "I'm Laurent, these are Victoria and James." He gestured to the vampires beside him.

"I'm Carlisle. This is my family, Emmett and Jasper, Rosalie, Esme and Alice, Edward and Bella." He pointed us out in groups, deliberately not calling attention to individuals. I felt a shock when he said my name.

"Do you have room for a few more players?" Laurent asked sociably. Carlisle matched Laurent's friendly tone. "Actually, we were just finishing up. But we'd

certainly be interested another time. Are you planning to stay in the area for long?"

"We're headed north, in fact, but we were curious to see who was in the neighborhood. We haven't run into any company in a long time."

"No, this region is usually empty except for us and the occasional visitor, like yourselves."

The tense atmosphere had slowly subsided into a casual conversation; I guessed that Jasper was using his peculiar gift to control the situation.

"What's your hunting range?" Laurent casually inquired. Carlisle ignored the assumption behind the inquiry. "The Olympic Range here, up and down the Coast Ranges on occasion. We keep a permanent residence nearby. There's another permanent settlement like ours up near Denali."

Laurent rocked back on his heels slightly.

"Permanent? How do you manage that?" There was honest curiosity in his voice.

"Why don't you come back to our home with us and we can talk comfortably?" Carlisle invited. "It's a rather long story." James and Victoria exchanged a surprised look at the mention of the word

"home," but Laurent controlled his expression better.

"That sounds very interesting, and welcome." His smile was genial. "We've been on the hunt all the way down from Ontario, and we haven't had the chance to

clean up in a while." His eyes moved appreciatively over Carlisle's refined appearance.

"Please don't take offense, but we'd appreciate it if you'd refrain from hunting in this immediate area. We have to stay inconspicuous, you understand," Carlisle explained.

"Of course." Laurent nodded. "We certainly won't encroach on your territory. We just ate outside of Seattle, anyway," he laughed. A shiver ran up my spine.

"We'll show you the way if you'd like to run with us — Emmett and Alice, you can go with Edward and Bella to get the Jeep," he casually added. Three things seemed to happen simultaneously while Carlisle was speaking. My hair ruffled with the light breeze, Edward stiffened, and the second male, James, suddenly whipped his head around, scrutinizing me, his nostrils flaring.

A swift rigidity fell on all of them as James lurched one step forward into a crouch. Edward bared his teeth, crouching in defense, a feral snarl ripping from his throat.

It was nothing like the playful sounds I'd heard from him this morning; it was the single most menacing thing I had ever heard, and chills ran from the crown of my head to the back of my heels.

"What's this?" Laurent exclaimed in open surprise. Neither James nor Edward relaxed their aggressive poses. James feinted slightly to the side, and Edward shifted in response.

"She's with us." Carlisle's firm rebuff was directed toward James. Laurent seemed to catch my scent less powerfully than James, but awareness now dawned on his face.

"You brought a snack?" he asked, his expression incredulous as he took an involuntary step forward.

Edward snarled even more ferociously, harshly, his lip curling high above his glistening, bared teeth. Laurent stepped back again.

"I said she's with us," Carlisle corrected in a hard voice.

"But she's human," Laurent protested. The words were not at all aggressive, merely astounded.

"Yes." Emmett was very much in evidence at Carlisle's side, his eyes on James. James slowly straightened out of his crouch, but his eyes never left me, his nostrils still wide. Edward stayed tensed like a lion in front of me.

When Laurent spoke, his tone was soothing — trying to defuse the sudden hostility. "It appears we have a lot to learn about each other."

"Indeed." Carlisle's voice was still cool.

"But we'd like to accept your invitation." His eyes flicked toward me and back to Carlisle. "And, of course, we will not harm the human girl. We won't hunt in your range, as I said."

James glanced in disbelief and aggravation at Laurent and exchanged another brief look with Victoria, whose eyes still flickered edgily from face to face.

Carlisle measured Laurent's open expression for a moment before he spoke.

"We'll show you the way. Jasper, Rosalie, Esme?" he called. They gathered together, blocking me from view as they converged. Alice was instantly at my side, and Emmett fell back slowly, his eyes locked on James as he backed toward us.

"Let's go, Bella." Edward's voice was low and bleak. This whole time I'd been rooted in place, terrified into absolute immobility. Edward had to grip my elbow and pull sharply to break my trance. Alice and Emmett were close behind us, hiding me. I stumbled alongside Edward, still stunned with fear. I couldn't hear if the main group had left yet. Edward's impatience was almost tangible as we moved at human speed to the forest edge.

Once we were into the trees, Edward slung me over his back without breaking stride. I gripped as tightly as possible as he took off, the others close on his heels. I kept my head down, but my eyes, wide with fright, wouldn't close. They plunged through the now-black forest like wraiths. The sense of exhilaration that usually seemed to possess Edward as he ran was completely absent, replaced by a fury that consumed him and drove him still faster. Even with me on his back, the others trailed behind.

We reached the Jeep in an impossibly short time, and Edward barely slowed as he flung me in the backseat.

"Strap her in," he ordered Emmett, who slid in beside me. Alice was already in the front seat, and Edward was starting the engine. It roared to life and we swerved backward, spinning around to face the winding road.

Edward was growling something too fast for me to understand, but it sounded a lot like a string of profanities.

The jolting trip was much worse this time, and the darkness only made it more frightening. Emmett and Alice both glared out the side windows. We hit the main road, and though our speed increased, I could see much better where we were going. And we were headed south, away from Forks.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

No one answered. No one even looked at me.

"Dammit, Edward! Where are you taking me?"

"We have to get you away from here — far away — now." He didn't look back, his eyes on the road. The speedometer read a hundred and five miles an hour.

"Turn around! You have to take me home!" I shouted. I struggled with the stupid harness, tearing at the straps.

"Emmett," Edward said grimly.

And Emmett secured my hands in his steely grasp.

"No! Edward! No, you can't do this."

"I have to, Bella, now please be quiet."

"I won't! You have to take me back — Charlie will call the FBI! They'll be all over your family — Carlisle and Esme! They'll have to leave, to hide forever!"

"Calm down, Bella." His voice was cold. "We've been there before."

"Not over me, you don't! You're not ruining everything over me!" I struggled violently, with total futility.

Alice spoke for the first time. "Edward, pull over." He flashed her a hard look, and then sped up.

"Edward, let's just talk this through."

"You don't understand," he roared in frustration. I'd never heard his voice so loud; it was deafening in the confines of the Jeep. The speedometer neared one hundred and fifteen. "He's a tracker, Alice, did you see that? He's a tracker!"

I felt Emmett stiffen next to me, and I wondered at his reaction to the word. It meant something more to the three of them than it did to me; I wanted to understand, but there was no opening for me to ask.

"Pull over, Edward." Alice's tone was reasonable, but there was a ring of authority in it I'd never heard before.

The speedometer inched passed one-twenty.

"Do it, Edward."

"Listen to me, Alice. I saw his mind. Tracking is his passion, his obsession — and he wants her, Alice — her, specifically. He begins the hunt tonight."

"He doesn't know where —"

He interrupted her. "How long do you think it will take him to cross her scent in town? His plan was already set before the words were out of Laurent's mouth."

I gasped, knowing where my scent would lead. "Charlie! You can't leave him there! You can't leave him!" I thrashed against the harness.

"She's right," Alice said.

The car slowed slightly.

"Let's just look at our options for a minute," Alice coaxed. The car slowed again, more noticeably, and then suddenly we screeched to a stop on the shoulder of the highway. I flew against the harness, and then slammed back into the seat.

"There are no options," Edward hissed.

"I'm not leaving Charlie!" I yelled.

He ignored me completely.

"We have to take her back," Emmett finally spoke.

"No." Edward was absolute.

"He's no match for us, Edward. He won't be able to touch her."

"He'll wait."

Emmett smiled. "I can wait, too."

"You didn't see — you don't understand. Once he commits to a hunt, he's unshakable. We'd have to kill him."

Emmett didn't seem upset by the idea. "That's an option."

"And the female. She's with him. If it turns into a fight, the leader will go with them, too."

"There are enough of us."

"There's another option," Alice said quietly.

Edward turned on her in fury, his voice a blistering snarl. "There — is —

no — other — option!"

Emmett and I both stared at him in shock, but Alice seemed unsurprised. The silence lasted for a long minute as Edward and Alice stared each other down.

I broke it. "Does anyone want to hear my plan?"

"No," Edward growled. Alice glared at him, finally provoked.

"Listen," I pleaded. "You take me back."

"No," he interrupted.

I glared at him and continued. "You take me back. I tell my dad I want to go home to Phoenix. I pack my bags. We wait till this tracker is watching, and then we run. He'll follow us and leave Charlie alone. Charlie won't call the FBI on your family. Then you can take me any damned place you want."

They stared at me, stunned.

"It's not a bad idea, really." Emmett's surprise was definitely an insult.

"It might work — and we simply can't leave her father unprotected. You know that," Alice said.

Everyone looked at Edward.

"It's too dangerous — I don't want him within a hundred miles of her." Emmett was supremely confident. "Edward, he's not getting through us." Alice thought for a minute. "I don't see him attacking. He'll try to wait for us to leave her alone."

"It won't take long for him to realize that's not going to happen."

"I demand that you take me home." I tried to sound firm. Edward pressed his fingers to his temples and squeezed his eyes shut.

"Please," I said in a much smaller voice.

He didn't look up. When he spoke, his voice sounded worn.

"You're leaving tonight, whether the tracker sees or not. You tell Charlie that you can't stand another minute in Forks. Tell him whatever story works. Pack the first things your hands touch, and then get in your truck. I don't care what he says to you. You have fifteen minutes. Do you hear me? Fifteen minutes from the time you cross the doorstep." The Jeep rumbled to life, and he spun us around, the tires

squealing. The needle on the speedometer started to race up the dial.

"Emmett?" I asked, looking pointedly at my hands.

"Oh, sorry." He let me loose.

A few minutes passed in silence, other than the roar of the engine. Then Edward spoke again.

"This is how it's going to happen. When we get to the house, if the tracker is not there, I will walk her to the door. Then she has fifteen minutes." He glared at me in the rearview mirror. "Emmett, you take the outside of the house. Alice, you get the truck. I'll be inside as long as she is. After she's out, you two can take the Jeep home and tell Carlisle."

"No way," Emmett broke in. "I'm with you."

"Think it through, Emmett. I don't know how long I'll be gone."

"Until we know how far this is going to go, I'm with you." Edward sighed. "If the tracker is there," he continued grimly, "we keep driving."

"We're going to make it there before him," Alice said confidently. Edward seemed to accept that. Whatever his problem with Alice was, he didn't doubt her now.

"What are we going to do with the Jeep?" she asked. His voice had a hard edge. "You're driving it home."

"No, I'm not," she said calmly.

The unintelligible stream of profanities started again.

"We can't all fit in my truck," I whispered.

Edward didn't appear to hear me.

"I think you should let me go alone," I said even more quietly. He heard that.

"Bella, please just do this my way, just this once," he said between clenched teeth.

"Listen, Charlie's not an imbecile," I protested. "If you're not in town tomorrow, he's going to get suspicious."

"That's irrelevant. We'll make sure he's safe, and that's all that matters."

"Then what about this tracker? He saw the way you acted tonight. He's going to think you're with me, wherever you are."

Emmett looked at me, insultingly surprised again. "Edward, listen to her," he urged. "I think she's right."

"Yes, she is," Alice agreed.

"I can't do that." Edward's voice was icy.

"Emmett should stay, too," I continued. "He definitely got an eyeful of Emmett."

"What?" Emmett turned on me.

"You'll get a better crack at him if you stay," Alice agreed. Edward stared at her incredulously. "You think I should let her go alone?"

"Of course not," Alice said. "Jasper and I will take her."

"I can't do that," Edward repeated, but this time there was a trace of defeat in his voice. The logic was working on him.

I tried to be persuasive. "Hang out here for a week —" I saw his expression in the mirror and amended "— a few days. Let Charlie see you haven't kidnapped me, and lead this James on a wild-goose chase. Make sure he's completely off my trail. Then come and meet me. Take a roundabout route, of course, and then Jasper and Alice can go home." I could see him beginning to consider it.

"Meet you where?"

"Phoenix." Of course.

"No. He'll hear that's where you're going," he said impatiently.

"And you'll make it look like that's a ruse, obviously. He'll know that we'll know that he's listening. He'll never believe I'm actually going where I say I am going."

"She's diabolical," Emmett chuckled.

"And if that doesn't work?"

"There are several million people in Phoenix," I informed him.

"It's not that hard to find a phone book."

"I won't go home."

"Oh?" he inquired, a dangerous note in his voice.

"I'm quite old enough to get my own place."

"Edward, we'll be with her," Alice reminded him.

"What are you going to do in Phoenix?" he asked her scathingly.

"Stay indoors."

"I kind of like it." Emmett was thinking about cornering James, no doubt.

"Shut up, Emmett."

"Look, if we try to take him down while she's still around, there's a much better chance that someone will get hurt — she'll get hurt, or you will, trying to protect her. Now, if we get him alone..." He trailed off with a slow smile. I was right.

The Jeep was crawling slowly along now as we drove into town. Despite my brave talk, I could feel the hairs on my arms standing up. I thought about Charlie, alone in the house, and tried to be courageous.

"Bella." Edward's voice was very soft. Alice and Emmett looked out their windows. "If you let anything happen to yourself— anything at all — I'm holding you personally responsible. Do you understand that?"

"Yes," I gulped.

He turned to Alice.

"Can Jasper handle this?"

"Give him some credit, Edward. He's been doing very, very well, all things considered."

"Can you handle this?" he asked.

And graceful little Alice pulled back her lips in a horrific grimace and let loose with a guttural snarl that had me cowering against the seat in terror.

Edward smiled at her. "But keep your opinions to yourself," he muttered suddenly.

# Chapter 19

## GOODBYES

Charlie was waiting up for me. All the house lights were on. My mind was blank as I tried to think of a way to make him let me go. This wasn't going to be pleasant.

Edward pulled up slowly, staying well back from my truck. All three of them were acutely alert, ramrod straight in their seats, listening to every sound of the wood, looking through every shadow, catching every scent, searching for something out of place. The engine cut off, and I sat, motionless, as they continued to listen.

"He's not here," Edward said tensely. "Let's go." Emmett reached over to help me get out of the harness.

"Don't worry, Bella," he said in a low but cheerful voice, "we'll take care of things here quickly."

I felt moisture filling up my eyes as I looked at Emmett. I barely knew him, and yet, somehow, not knowing when I would see him again after tonight was anguishing. I knew this was just a faint taste of the goodbyes I would have to survive in the next hour, and the thought made the tears begin to spill.

"Alice, Emmett." Edward's voice was a command. They slithered soundlessly into the darkness, instantly disappearing. Edward opened my door and took my hand, then drew me into the protecting

enclosure of his arm. He walked me swiftly toward the house, eyes always roving through the night.

"Fifteen minutes," he warned under his breath.

"I can do this." I sniffled. My tears had given me an inspiration. I stopped on the porch and took hold of his face in my hands. I looked fiercely into his eyes.

"I love you," I said in a low, intense voice. "I will always love you, no matter what happens now."

"Nothing is going to happen to you, Bella," he said just as fiercely.

"Just follow the plan, okay? Keep Charlie safe for me. He's not going to like me very much after this, and I want to have the chance to apologize later."

"Get inside, Bella. We have to hurry." His voice was urgent.

"One more thing," I whispered passionately. "Don't listen to another word I say tonight!" He was leaning in, and so all I had to do was stretch up on my toes to kiss his surprised, frozen lips with as much force as I was capable of. Then I turned and kicked the door open.

"Go away, Edward!" I yelled at him, running inside and slamming the door shut in his still-shocked face.

"Bella?" Charlie had been hovering in the living room, and he was already on his feet.

"Leave me alone!" I screamed at him through my tears, which were flowing relentlessly now. I ran up

the stairs to my room, throwing the door shut and locking it. I ran to my bed, flinging myself on the floor to retrieve my duffel bag. I reached swiftly between the mattress and box spring to grab the knotted old sock that contained my secret cash hoard. Charlie was pounding on my door.

"Bella, are you okay? What's going on?" His voice was frightened.

"I'm going borne," I shouted, my voice breaking in the perfect spot.

"Did he hurt you?" His tone edged toward anger.

"No!" I shrieked a few octaves higher. I turned to my dresser, and Edward was already there, silently yanking out armfuls of random clothes, which he proceeded to throw to me.

"Did he break up with you?" Charlie was perplexed.

"No!" I yelled, slightly more breathless as I shoved everything into the bag. Edward threw another drawer's contents at me. The bag was pretty much full now.

"What happened, Bella?" Charlie shouted through the door, pounding again.

"I broke up with him!" I shouted back, jerking on the zipper of my bag. Edward's capable hands pushed mine away and zipped it smoothly. He put the strap carefully over my arm.

"I'll be in the truck — go!" he whispered, and pushed me toward the door. He vanished out the window.

I unlocked the door and pushed past Charlie roughly, struggling with my heavy bag as I ran down the stairs.

"What happened?" he yelled. He was right behind me. "I thought you liked him."

He caught my elbow in the kitchen. Though he was still bewildered, his grip was firm.

He spun me around to look at him, and I could see in his face that he had no intention of letting me leave. I could think of only one way to escape, and it involved hurting him so much that I hated myself for even considering it. But I had no time, and I had to keep him safe. I glared up at my father, fresh tears in my eyes for what I was about to do.

"I do like him — that's the problem. I can't do this anymore! I can't put down any more roots here! I don't want to end up trapped in this stupid, boring town like Mom! I'm not going to make the same dumb mistake she did. I hate it — I can't stay here another minute!"

His hand dropped from my arm like I'd electrocuted him. I turned away from his shocked, wounded face and headed for the door.

"Bells, you can't leave now. It's nighttime," he whispered behind me. I didn't turn around. "I'll sleep in the truck if I get tired."

"Just wait another week," he pled, still shell-shocked. "Renée will be back by then."

This completely derailed me. "What?"

Charlie continued eagerly, almost babbling with relief as I hesitated.

"She called while you were out. Things aren't going so well in Florida, and if Phil doesn't get signed by the end of the week, they're going back to Arizona. The assistant coach of the Sidewinders said they might have a spot for another shortstop."

I shook my head, trying to reassemble my now-confused thoughts. Every passing second put Charlie in more danger.

"I have a key," I muttered, turning the knob. He was too close, one hand extended toward me, his face dazed. I couldn't lose any more time arguing with him. I was going to have to hurt him further.

"Just let me go, Charlie." I repeated my mother's last words as she'd walked out this same door so many years ago. I said them as angrily as I could manage, and I threw the door open. "It didn't work out, okay? I really, really hate Forks!"

My cruel words did their job — Charlie stayed frozen on the doorstep, stunned, while I ran into the night. I was hideously frightened of the empty yard. I ran wildly for the truck, visualizing a dark shadow behind me. I threw my bag in the bed and wrenched the door open. The key was waiting in the ignition.

"I'll call you tomorrow!" I yelled, wishing more than anything that I could explain everything to him right then, knowing I would never be able to. I gunned the engine and peeled out.

Edward reached for my hand.

"Pull over," he said as the house, and Charlie, disappeared behind us.

"I can drive," I said through the tears pouring down my cheeks. His long hands unexpectedly gripped my waist, and his foot pushed mine off the gas pedal. He pulled me across his lap, wrenching my hands free of the wheel, and suddenly he was in the driver's seat. The truck didn't swerve an inch.

"You wouldn't be able to find the house," he explained. Lights flared suddenly behind us. I stared out the back window, eyes wide with horror.

"It's just Alice," he reassured me. He took my hand again. My mind was filled with the image of Charlie in the doorway. "The tracker?"

"He heard the end of your performance," Edward said grimly.

"Charlie?" I asked in dread.

"The tracker followed us. He's running behind us now." My body went cold.

"Can we outrun him?"

"No." But he sped up as he spoke. The truck's engine whined in protest. My plan suddenly didn't feel so brilliant anymore.

I was staring back at Alice's headlights when the truck shuddered and a dark shadow sprung up outside the window.

My bloodcurdling scream lasted a fraction of a second before Edward's hand clamped down on my mouth.

"It's Emmett!"

He released my mouth, and wound his arm around my waist.

"It's okay, Bella," he promised. "You're going to be safe." We raced through the quiet town toward the north highway.

"I didn't realize you were still so bored with small-town life," he said conversationally, and I knew he was trying to distract me. "It seemed like you were adjusting fairly well — especially recently. Maybe I was just flattering myself that I was making life more interesting for you."

"I wasn't being nice," I confessed, ignoring his attempt at diversion, looking down at my knees. "That was the same thing my mom said when she left him. You could say I was hitting below the belt."

"Don't worry. He'll forgive you." He smiled a little, though it didn't touch his eyes.

I stared at him desperately, and he saw the naked panic in my eyes.

"Bella, it's going to be all right."

"But it won't be all right when I'm not with you," I whispered.

"We'll be together again in a few days," he said, tightening his arm around me. "Don't forget that this was your idea."

"It was the best idea — of course it was mine." His answering smile was bleak and disappeared immediately.

"Why did this happen?" I asked, my voice catching. "Why me?" He stared blackly at the road ahead. "It's my fault — I was a fool to expose you like that." The rage in his voice was directed internally.

"That's not what I meant," I insisted. "I was there, big deal. It didn't bother the other two. Why did this James decide to kill met There're people all over the place, why me?"

He hesitated, thinking before he answered.

"I got a good look at his mind tonight," he began in a low voice. "I'm not sure if there's anything I could have done to avoid this, once he saw you. It is partially your fault." His voice was wry. "If you didn't smell so appallingly luscious, he might not have bothered. But when I defended you... well, that made it a lot worse. He's not used to being thwarted, no matter how insignificant the object. He thinks of himself as a hunter and nothing else. His existence is consumed with tracking, and a challenge is all he asks of life. Suddenly we've presented him with a beautiful challenge — a large clan of strong fighters all bent on protecting the one vulnerable element. You wouldn't believe how euphoric he is now. It's his favorite game, and we've just made it his most exciting game ever." His tone was full of disgust.

He paused a moment.

"But if I had stood by, he would have killed you right then," he said with hopeless frustration.

"I thought... I didn't smell the same to the others... as I do to you," I said hesitantly.

"You don't. But that doesn't mean that you aren't still a temptation to every one of them. If you had appealed to the tracker — or any of them —

the same way you appeal to me, it would have meant a fight right there." I shuddered.

"I don't think I have any choice but to kill him now," he muttered.

"Carlisle won't like it."

I could hear the tires cross the bridge, though I couldn't see the river in the dark. I knew we were getting close. I had to ask him now.

"How can you kill a vampire?"

He glanced at me with unreadable eyes and his voice was suddenly harsh.

"The only way to be sure is to tear him to shreds, and then burn the pieces."

"And the other two will fight with him?"

"The woman will. I'm not sure about Laurent. They don't have a very strong bond — he's only with them for convenience. He was embarrassed by James in the meadow..."

"But James and the woman — they'll try to kill you?" I asked, my voice raw.

"Bella, don't you dare waste time worrying about me. Your only concern is keeping yourself safe and — please, please — trying not to be reckless."

"Is he still following?"

"Yes. He won't attack the house, though. Not tonight." He turned off onto the invisible drive, with Alice following behind. We drove right up to the house. The lights inside were bright, but they did little to alleviate the blackness of the encroaching forest. Emmett had my door open before the truck was stopped; he pulled me out of the seat, tucked me like a football into his vast chest, and ran me through the door.

We burst into the large white room, Edward and Alice at our sides. All of them were there; they were already on their feet at the sound of our approach. Laurent stood in their midst. I could hear low growls rumble deep in Emmett's throat as he set me down next to Edward.

"He's tracking us," Edward announced, glaring balefully at Laurent. Laurent's face was unhappy. "I was afraid of that." Alice danced to Jasper's side and whispered in his ear; her lips quivered with the speed of her silent speech. They flew up the stairs together. Rosalie watched them, and then moved quickly to Emmett's side. Her beautiful eyes were intense and — when they flickered unwillingly to my face — furious.

"What will he do?" Carlisle asked Laurent in chilling tones.

"I'm sorry," he answered. "I was afraid, when your boy there defended her, that it would set him off."

"Can you stop him?"

Laurent shook his head. "Nothing stops James when he gets started."

"We'll stop him," Emmett promised. There was no doubt what he meant.

"You can't bring him down. I've never seen anything like him in my three hundred years. He's absolutely lethal. That's why I joined his coven." His coven, I thought, of course. The show of leadership in the clearing was merely that, a show.

Laurent was shaking his head. He glanced at me, perplexed, and back to Carlisle. "Are you sure it's worth it?"

Edward's enraged roar filled the room; Laurent cringed back. Carlisle looked gravely at Laurent. "I'm afraid you're going to have to make a choice."

Laurent understood. He deliberated for a moment. His eyes took in every face, and finally swept the bright room.

"I'm intrigued by the life you've created here. But I won't get in the middle of this. I bear none of you any enmity, but I won't go up against James. I think I will head north — to that clan in Denali." He hesitated.

"Don't underestimate James. He's got a brilliant mind and unparalleled senses. He's every bit as comfortable in the human world as you seem to be, and he won't

come at you head on... I'm sorry for what's been unleashed here. Truly sorry." He bowed his head, but I saw him flicker another puzzled look at me.

"Go in peace," was Carlisle's formal answer.

Laurent took another long look around himself, and then he hurried out the door.

The silence lasted less than a second.

"How close?" Carlisle looked to Edward.

Esme was already moving; her hand touched an inconspicuous keypad on the wall, and with a groan, huge metal shutters began sealing up the glass wall. I gaped.

"About three miles out past the river; he's circling around to meet up with the female."

"What's the plan?"

"We'll lead him off, and then Jasper and Alice will run her south."

"And then?"

Edward's tone was deadly. "As soon as Bella is clear, we hunt him."

"I guess there's no other choice," Carlisle agreed, his face grim. Edward turned to Rosalie.

"Get her upstairs and trade clothes," Edward commanded. She stared back at him with livid disbelief.

"Why should I?" she hissed. "What is she to me? Except a menace — a danger you've chosen to inflict on all of us."

I flinched back from the venom in her voice.

"Rose…" Emmett murmured, putting one hand on her shoulder. She shook it off.

But I was watching Edward carefully, knowing his temper, worried about his reaction.

He surprised me. He looked away from Rosalie as if she hadn't spoken, as if she didn't exist.

"Esme?" he asked calmly.

"Of course," Esme murmured.

Esme was at my side in half a heartbeat, swinging me up easily into her arms, and dashing up the stairs before I could gasp in shock.

"What are we doing?" I asked breathlessly as she set me down in a dark room somewhere off the second-story hall.

"Trying to confuse the smell. It won't work for long, but it might help get you out." I could hear her clothes falling to the floor.

"I don't think I'll fit…" I hesitated, but her hands were abruptly pulling my shirt over my head. I quickly stripped my jeans off myself. She handed me something, it felt like a shirt. I struggled to get my arms through the right holes. As soon as I was done she handed me her slacks. I yanked them on, but I

couldn't get my feet out; they were too long. She deftly rolled the hems a few times so I could stand. Somehow she was already in my clothes. She pulled me back to the stairs, where Alice stood, a small leather bag in one hand. They each grabbed one of my elbows and half-carried me as they flew down the stairs.

It appeared that everything had been settled downstairs in our absence. Edward and Emmett were ready to leave, Emmett carrying a heavy-looking backpack over his shoulder. Carlisle was handing something small to Esme. He turned and handed Alice the same thing — it was a tiny silver cell phone.

"Esme and Rosalie will be taking your truck, Bella," he told me as he passed. I nodded, glancing warily at Rosalie. She was glowering at Carlisle with a resentful expression.

"Alice, Jasper — take the Mercedes. You'll need the dark tint in the south."

They nodded as well.

"We're taking the Jeep."

I was surprised to see that Carlisle intended to go with Edward. I realized suddenly, with a stab of fear, that they made up the hunting party.

"Alice," Carlisle asked, "will they take the bait?" Everyone watched Alice as she closed her eyes and became incredibly still. Finally her eyes opened. "He'll track you. The woman will follow the truck. We

should be able to leave after that." Her voice was certain.

"Let's go." Carlisle began to walk toward the kitchen. But Edward was at my side at once. He caught me up in his iron grip, crushing me to him. He seemed unaware of his watching family as he pulled my face to his, lifting my feet off the floor. For the shortest second, his lips were icy and hard against mine. Then it was over. He set me down, still holding my face, his glorious eyes burning into mine. His eyes went blank, curiously dead, as he turned away.

And they were gone.

We stood there, the others looking away from me as the tears streaked noiselessly down my face.

The silent moment dragged on, and then Esme's phone vibrated in her hand. It flashed to her ear.

"Now," she said. Rosalie stalked out the front door without another glance in my direction, but Esme touched my cheek as she passed.

"Be safe." Her whisper lingered behind them as they slipped out the door. I heard my truck start thunderously, and then fade away.

Jasper and Alice waited. Alice's phone seemed to be at her ear before it buzzed.

"Edward says the woman is on Esme's trail. I'll get the car." She vanished into the shadows the way Edward had gone.

Jasper and I looked at each other. He stood across the length of the entryway from me… being careful.

"You're wrong, you know," he said quietly.

"What?" I gasped.

"I can feel what you're feeling now — and you are worth it."

"I'm not," I mumbled. "If anything happens to them, it will be for nothing."

"You're wrong," he repeated, smiling kindly at me. I heard nothing, but then Alice stepped through the front door and came toward me with her arms held out.

"May I?" she asked.

"You're the first one to ask permission." I smiled wryly. She lifted me in her slender arms as easily as Emmett had, shielding me protectively, and then we flew out the door, leaving the lights bright behind us.

# Chapter 20

## IMPATIENCE

When I woke up I was confused. My thoughts were hazy, still twisted up in dreams and nightmares; it took me longer than it should have to realize where I was.

This room was too bland to belong anywhere but in a hotel. The bedside lamps, bolted to the tables, were a dead giveaway, as were the long drapes made from the same fabric as the bedspread, and the generic watercolor prints on the walls.

I tried to remember how I got here, but nothing came at first. I did remember the sleek black car, the glass in the windows darker than that on a limousine. The engine was almost silent, though we'd raced across the black freeways at more than twice the legal speed. And I remembered Alice sitting with me on the dark leather backseat. Somehow, during the long night, my head had ended up against her granite neck. My closeness didn't seem to bother her at all, and her cool, hard skin was oddly comforting to me. The front of her thin cotton shirt was cold, damp with the tears that streamed from my eyes until, red and sore, they ran dry.

Sleep had evaded me; my aching eyes strained open even though the night finally ended and dawn broke over a low peak somewhere in California. The gray light, streaking across the cloudless sky, stung my eyes. But I couldn't close them; when I did, the images that flashed all too vividly, like still slides

behind my lids, were unbearable. Charlie's broken expression — Edward's brutal snarl, teeth bared — Rosalie's resentful glare — the keen-eyed scrutiny of the tracker — the dead look in Edward's eyes after he kissed me the last time… I couldn't stand to see them. So I fought against my weariness and the sun rose higher.

I was still awake when we came through a shallow mountain pass and the sun, behind us now, reflected off the tiled rooftops of the Valley of the Sun. I didn't have enough emotion left to be surprised that we'd made a three-day journey in one. I stared blankly at the wide, flat expanse laid out in front of me. Phoenix — the palm trees, the scrubby creosote, the haphazard lines of the intersecting freeways, the green swaths of golf courses and turquoise splotches of swimming pools, all submerged in a thin smog and embraced by the short, rocky ridges that weren't really big enough to be called mountains.

The shadows of the palm trees slanted across the freeway — defined, sharper than I remembered, paler than they should be. Nothing could hide in these shadows. The bright, open freeway seemed benign enough. But I felt no relief, no sense of homecoming.

"Which way to the airport, Bella?" Jasper had asked, and I flinched, though his voice was quite soft and un-alarming. It was the first sound, besides the purr of the car, to break the long night's silence.

"Stay on the I-ten," I'd answered automatically. "We'll pass right by it." My brain had worked slowly through the fog of sleep deprivation.

"Are we flying somewhere?" I'd asked Alice.

"No, but it's better to be close, just in case." I remembered beginning the loop around Sky Harbor International... but not ending it. I suppose that must have been when I'd fallen asleep. Though, now that I'd chased the memories down, I did have a vague impression of leaving the car — the sun was just falling behind the horizon — my arm draped over Alice's shoulder and her arm firm around my waist, dragging me along as I stumbled through the warm, dry shadows. I had no memory of this room.

I looked at the digital clock on the nightstand. The red numbers claimed it was three o'clock, but they gave no indication if it was night or day. No edge of light escaped the thick curtains, but the room was bright with the light from the lamps.

I rose stiffly and staggered to the window, pulling back the drapes. It was dark outside. Three in the morning, then. My room looked out on a deserted section of the freeway and the new long-term parking garage for the airport. It was slightly comforting to be able to pinpoint time and place.

I looked down at myself. I was still wearing Esme's clothes, and they didn't fit very well at all. I looked around the room, glad when I discovered my duffel bag on top of the low dresser.

I was on my way to find new clothes when a light tap on the door made me jump.

"Can I come in?" Alice asked.

I took a deep breath. "Sure."

She walked in, and looked me over cautiously. "You look like you could sleep longer," she said.

I just shook my head.

She drifted silently to the curtains and closed them securely before turning back to me.

"We'll need to stay inside," she told me.

"Okay." My voice was hoarse; it cracked.

"Thirsty?" she asked.

I shrugged. "I'm okay. How about you?"

"Nothing unmanageable." She smiled. "I ordered some food for you, it's in the front room. Edward reminded me that you have to eat a lot more frequently than we do."

I was instantly more alert. "He called?"

"No," she said, and watched as my face fell. "It was before we left." She took my hand carefully and led me through the door into the living room of the hotel suite. I could hear a low buzz of voices coming from the TV. Jasper sat motionlessly at the desk in the corner, his eyes watching the news with no glimmer of interest.

I sat on the floor next to the coffee table, where a tray of food waited, and began picking at it without noticing what I was eating. Alice perched on the arm of the sofa and stared blankly at the TV like Jasper.

I ate slowly, watching her, turning now and then to glance quickly at Jasper. It began to dawn on me that they were too still. They never looked away from the screen, though commercials were playing now. I pushed the tray away, my stomach abruptly uneasy. Alice looked down at me.

"What's wrong, Alice?" I asked.

"Nothing's wrong." Her eyes were wide, honest… and I didn't trust them.

"What do we do now?"

"We wait for Carlisle to call."

"And should he have called by now?" I could see that I was near the mark. Alice's eyes flitted from mine to the phone on top of her leather bag and back.

"What does that mean?" My voice quavered, and I fought to control it.

"That he hasn't called yet?"

"It just means that they don't have anything to tell us." But her voice was too even, and the air was harder to breathe. Jasper was suddenly beside Alice, closer to me than usual.

"Bella," he said in a suspiciously soothing voice. "You have nothing to worry about. You are completely safe here."

"I know that."

"Then why are you frightened?" he asked, confused. He might feel the tenor of my emotions, but he couldn't read the reasons behind them.

"You heard what Laurent said." My voice was just a whisper, but I was sure they could hear me. "He said James was lethal. What if something goes wrong, and they get separated? If something happens to any of them, Carlisle, Emmett… Edward…" I gulped. "If that wild female hurts Esme…" My voice had grown higher, a note of hysteria beginning to rise in it. "How could I live with myself when it's my fault? None of you should be risking yourselves for me —"

"Bella, Bella, stop," he interrupted me, his words pouring out so quickly they were hard to understand. "You're worrying about all the wrong things, Bella. Trust me on this — none of us are in jeopardy. You are under too much strain as it is; don't add to it with wholly unnecessary worries. Listen to me!" he ordered, for I had looked away. "Our family is strong. Our only fear is losing you."

"But why should you —"

Alice interrupted this time, touching my cheek with her cold fingers.

"It's been almost a century that Edward's been alone. Now he's found you. You can't see the changes that we see, we who have been with him for so long. Do you think any of us want to look into his eyes for the next hundred years if he loses you?"

My guilt slowly subsided as I looked into her dark eyes. But, even as the calm spread over me, I knew I couldn't trust my feelings with Jasper there.

It was a very long day.

We stayed in the room. Alice called down to the front desk and asked them to ignore our maid service for now. The windows stayed shut, the TV on, though no one watched it. At regular intervals, food was delivered for me. The silver phone resting on Alice's bag seemed to grow bigger as the hours passed.

My babysitters handled the suspense better than I did. As I fidgeted and paced, they simply grew more still, two statues whose eyes followed me imperceptibly as I moved. I occupied myself with memorizing the room; the striped pattern of the couches, tan, peach, cream, dull gold, and tan again. Sometimes I stared at the abstract prints, randomly finding pictures in the shapes, like I'd found pictures in the clouds as a child. I traced a blue hand, a woman combing her hair, a cat stretching. But when the pale red circle became a staring eye, I looked away. As the afternoon wore on, I went back to bed, simply for something to do. I hoped that by myself in the dark, I could give in to the terrible fears that hovered on the edge of my consciousness, unable to break through under Jasper's careful supervision.

But Alice followed me casually, as if by some coincidence she had grown tired of the front room at the same time. I was beginning to wonder exactly what sort of instructions Edward had given her. I lay across the bed, and she sat, legs folded, next to me. I

ignored her at first, suddenly tired enough to sleep. But after a few minutes, the panic that had held off in Jasper's presence began to make itself known. I gave up on the idea of sleep quickly then, curling up into a small ball, wrapping my arms around my legs.

"Alice?" I asked.

"Yes?"

I kept my voice very calm. "What do you think they're doing?"

"Carlisle wanted to lead the tracker as far north as possible, wait for him to get close, and then turn and ambush him. Esme and Rosalie were supposed to head west as long as they could keep the female behind them. If she turned around, they were to head back to Forks and keep an eye on your dad. So I imagine things are going well if they can't call. It means the tracker is close enough that they don't want him to overhear."

"And Esme?"

"I think she must be back in Forks. She won't call if there's any chance the female will overhear. I expect they're all just being very careful."

"Do you think they're safe, really?"

"Bella, how many times do we have to tell you that there's no danger to us?"

"Would you tell me the truth, though?"

"Yes. I will always tell you the truth." Her voice was earnest. I deliberated for a moment, and decided she meant it.

"Tell me then... how do you become a vampire?"

My question caught her off guard. She was quiet. I rolled over to look at her, and her expression seemed ambivalent.

"Edward doesn't want me to tell you that," she said firmly, but I sensed she didn't agree.

"That's not fair. I think I have a right to know."

"I know."

I looked at her, waiting.

She sighed. "He'll be extremely angry."

"It's none of his business. This is between you and me. Alice, as a friend, I'm begging you." And we were friends now, somehow — as she must have known we would be all along.

She looked at me with her splendid, wise eyes... choosing.

"I'll tell you the mechanics of it," she said finally, "but I don't remember it myself, and I've never done it or seen it done, so keep in mind that I can only tell you the theory."

I waited.

"As predators, we have a glut of weapons in our physical arsenal — much, much more than really

necessary. The strength, the speed, the acute senses, not to mention those of us like Edward, Jasper, and I, who have extra senses as well. And then, like a carnivorous flower, we are physically attractive to our prey."

I was very still, remembering how pointedly Edward had demonstrated the same concept for me in the meadow.

She smiled a wide, ominous smile. "We have another fairly superfluous weapon. We're also venomous," she said, her teeth glistening. "The venom doesn't kill — it's merely incapacitating. It works slowly, spreading through the bloodstream, so that, once bitten, our prey is in too much physical pain to escape us. Mostly superfluous, as I said. If we're that close, the prey doesn't escape. Of course, there are always exceptions. Carlisle, for example."

"So... if the venom is left to spread..." I murmured.

"It takes a few days for the transformation to be complete, depending on how much venom is in the bloodstream, how close the venom enters to the heart. As long as the heart keeps beating, the poison spreads, healing, changing the body as it moves through it. Eventually the heart stops, and the conversion is finished. But all that time, every minute of it, a victim would be wishing for death."

I shivered.

"It's not pleasant, you see."

"Edward said that it was very hard to do… I don't quite understand," I said.

"We're also like sharks in a way. Once we taste the blood, or even smell it for that matter, it becomes very hard to keep from feeding. Sometimes impossible. So you see, to actually bite someone, to taste the blood, it would begin the frenzy. It's difficult on both sides — the blood-lust on the one hand, the awful pain on the other."

"Why do you think you don't remember?"

"I don't know. For everyone else, the pain of transformation is the sharpest memory they have of their human life. I remember nothing of being human." Her voice was wistful.

We lay silently, wrapped in our individual meditations.

The seconds ticked by, and I had almost forgotten her presence, I was so enveloped in my thoughts.

Then, without any warning, Alice leaped from the bed, landing lightly on her feet. My head jerked up as I stared at her, startled.

"Something's changed." Her voice was urgent, and she wasn't talking to me anymore.

She reached the door at the same time Jasper did. He had obviously heard our conversation and her sudden exclamation. He put his hands on her shoulders and guided her back to the bed, sitting her on the edge.

"What do you see?" he asked intently, staring into her eyes. Her eyes were focused on something very far away. I sat close to her, leaning in to catch her low, quick voice.

"I see a room. It's long, and there are mirrors everywhere. The floor is wooden. He's in the room, and he's waiting. There's gold... a gold stripe across the mirrors."

"Where is the room?"

"I don't know. Something is missing — another decision hasn't been made yet."

"How much time?"

"It's soon. He'll be in the mirror room today, or maybe tomorrow. It all depends. He's waiting for something. And he's in the dark now." Jasper's voice was calm, methodical, as he questioned her in a practiced way. "What is he doing?"

"He's watching TV... no, he's running a VCR, in the dark, in another place."

"Can you see where he is?"

"No, it's too dark."

"And the mirror room, what else is there?"

"Just the mirrors, and the gold. It's a band, around the room. And there's a black table with a big stereo, and a TV. He's touching the VCR

there, but he doesn't watch the way he does in the dark room. This is the room where he waits." Her eyes drifted, then focused on Jasper's face.

"There's nothing else?"

She shook her head. They looked at each other, motionless.

"What does it mean?" I asked.

Neither of them answered for a moment, then Jasper looked at me.

"It means the tracker's plans have changed. He's made a decision that will lead him to the mirror room, and the dark room."

"But we don't know where those rooms are?"

"No."

"But we do know that he won't be in the mountains north of Washington, being hunted. He'll elude them." Alice's voice was bleak.

"Should we call?" I asked. They traded a serious look, undecided. And the phone rang.

Alice was across the room before I could lift my head to look at it. She pushed a button and held the phone to her ear, but she didn't speak first.

"Carlisle," she breathed. She didn't seem surprised or relieved, the way I felt.

"Yes," she said, glancing at me. She listened for a long moment.

"I just saw him." She described again the vision she'd seen. "Whatever made him get on that plane… it was leading him to those rooms." She paused. "Yes," Alice said into the phone, and then she spoke to me.

"Bella?"

She held the phone out toward me. I ran to it.

"Hello?" I breathed.

"Bella," Edward said.

"Oh, Edward! I was so worried."

"Bella," he sighed in frustration, "I told you not to worry about anything but yourself." It was so unbelievably good to hear his voice. I felt the hovering cloud of despair lighten and drift back as he spoke.

"Where are you?"

"We're outside of Vancouver. Bella, I'm sorry — we lost him. He seems suspicious of us — he's careful to stay just far enough away that I can't hear what he's thinking. But he's gone now — it looks like he got on a plane. We think he's heading back to Forks to start over." I could hear Alice filling in Jasper behind me, her quick words blurring together into a humming noise.

"I know. Alice saw that he got away."

"You don't have to worry, though. He won't find anything to lead him to you. You just have to stay there and wait till we find him again."

"I'll be fine. Is Esme with Charlie?"

"Yes — the female has been in town. She went to the house, but while Charlie was at work. She hasn't gone near him, so don't be afraid. He's safe with Esme and Rosalie watching."

"What is she doing?"

"Probably trying to pick up the trail. She's been all through the town during the night. Rosalie traced her through the airport, all the roads around town, the school... she's digging, Bella, but there's nothing to find."

"And you're sure Charlie's safe?"

"Yes, Esme won't let him out of her sight. And we'll be there soon. If the tracker gets anywhere near Forks, we'll have him."

"I miss you," I whispered.

"I know, Bella. Believe me, I know. It's like you've taken half my self away with you."

"Come and get it, then," I challenged.

"Soon, as soon as I possibly can. I will make you safe first." His voice was hard.

"I love you," I reminded him.

"Could you believe that, despite everything I've put you through, I love you, too?"

"Yes, I can, actually."

"I'll come for you soon."

"I'll be waiting."

As soon as the phone went dead, the cloud of depression began to creep over me again.

I turned to give the phone back to Alice and found her and Jasper bent over the table, where Alice was sketching on a piece of hotel stationery. I leaned on the back of the couch, looking over her shoulder. She drew a room: long, rectangular, with a thinner, square section at the back. The wooden planks that made up the floor stretched lengthwise across the room. Down the walls were lines denoting the breaks in the mirrors. And then, wrapping around the walls, waist high, a long band. The band Alice said was gold.

"It's a ballet studio," I said, suddenly recognizing the familiar shapes. They looked at me, surprised.

"Do you know this room?" Jasper's voice sounded calm, but there was an undercurrent of something I couldn't identify. Alice bent her head to her work, her hand flying across the page now, the shape of an emergency exit taking shape against the back wall, the stereo and TV on a low table by the front right corner.

"It looks like a place I used to go for dance lessons — when I was eight or nine. It was shaped just the same." I touched the page where the square section jutted out, narrowing the back part of the room. "That's where the bathrooms were — the doors were through the other dance floor. But the stereo was here" — I pointed to the left corner — "it was older, and there wasn't a TV. There was a window in the waiting room — you would see the room from this

perspective if you looked through it." Alice and Jasper were staring at me.

"Are you sure it's the same room?" Jasper asked, still calm.

"No, not at all — I suppose most dance studios would look the same — the mirrors, the bar." I traced my finger along the ballet bar set against the mirrors. "It's just the shape that looked familiar." I touched the door, set in exactly the same place as the one I remembered.

"Would you have any reason to go there now?" Alice asked, breaking my reverie.

"No, I haven't been there in almost ten years. I was a terrible dancer —

they always put me in the back for recitals," I admitted.

"So there's no way it could be connected with you?" Alice asked intently.

"No, I don't even think the same person owns it. I'm sure it's just another dance studio, somewhere."

"Where was the studio you went to?" Jasper asked in a casual voice.

"It was just around the corner from my mom's house. I used to walk there after school…" I said, my voice trailing off. I didn't miss the look they exchanged.

"Here in Phoenix, then?" His voice was still casual.

"Yes," I whispered. "Fifty-eighth Street and Cactus." We all sat in silence, staring at the drawing.

"Alice, is that phone safe?"

"Yes," she reassured me. "The number would just trace back to Washington."

"Then I can use it to call my mom."

"I thought she was in Florida."

"She is — but she's coming home soon, and she can't come back to that house while..." My voice trembled. I was thinking about something Edward had said, about the red-haired female at Charlie's house, at the school, where my records would be.

"How will you reach her?"

"They don't have a permanent number except at the house — she's supposed to check her messages regularly."

"Jasper?" Alice asked.

He thought about it. "I don't think there's any way it could hurt — be sure you don't say where you are, of course."

I reached eagerly for the phone and dialed the familiar number. It rang four times, and then I heard my mom's breezy voice telling me to leave a message.

"Mom," I said after the beep, "it's me. Listen, I need you to do something. It's important. As soon as you get this message, call me at this number." Alice was already at my side, writing the number for me on the

bottom of her picture. I read it carefully, twice. "Please don't go anywhere until you talk to me. Don't worry, I'm okay, but I have to talk to you right away, no matter how late you get this call, all right? I love you, Mom. Bye." I closed my eyes and prayed with all my might that no unforeseen change of plans would bring her home before she got my message.

I settled into the sofa, nibbling on a plate of leftover fruit, anticipating a long evening. I thought about calling Charlie, but I wasn't sure if I should be home by now or not. I concentrated on the news, watching out for stories about Florida, or about spring training —

strikes or hurricanes or terrorist attacks — anything that might send them home early.

Immortality must grant endless patience. Neither Jasper nor Alice seemed to feel the need to do anything at all. For a while, Alice sketched the vague outline of the dark room from her vision, as much as she could see in the light from the TV. But when she was done, she simply sat, looking at the blank walls with her timeless eyes. Jasper, too, seemed to have no urge to pace, or peek through the curtains, or run screaming out the door, the way I did.

I must have fallen asleep on the couch, waiting for the phone to ring again. The touch of Alice's cold hands woke me briefly as she carried me to the bed, but I was unconscious again before my head hit the pillow.

# Chapter 21

## PHONE CALL

I could feel it was too early again when I woke, and I knew I was getting the schedule of my days and nights slowly reversed. I lay in my bed and listened to the quiet voices of Alice and Jasper in the other room. That they were loud enough for me to hear at all was strange. I rolled till my feet touched the floor and then staggered to the living room. The clock on the TV said it was just after two in the morning. Alice and Jasper were sitting together on the sofa, Alice sketching again while Jasper looked over her shoulder. They didn't look up when I entered, too engrossed in Alice's work.

I crept to Jasper's side to peek.

"Did she see something more?" I asked him quietly.

"Yes. Something's brought him back to the room with the VCR, but it's light now."

I watched as Alice drew a square room with dark beams across its low ceiling. The walls were paneled in wood, a little too dark, out of date. The floor had a dark carpet with a pattern in it. There was a large window against the south wall, and an opening through the west wall led to the living room. One side of that entrance was stone — a large tan stone fireplace that was open to both rooms. The focus of the room from this perspective, the TV and VCR, balanced on a too-small wooden stand, were in the southwest corner of the room. An aged sectional sofa

curved around in front of the TV, a round coffee table in front of it.

"The phone goes there," I whispered, pointing.

Two pairs of eternal eyes stared at me.

"That's my mother's house."

Alice was already off the couch, phone in hand, dialing. I stared at the precise rendering of my mother's family room. Uncharacteristically, Jasper slid closer to me. He lightly touched his hand to my shoulder, and the physical contact seemed to make his calming influence stronger. The panic stayed dull, unfocused.

Alice's lips were trembling with the speed of her words, the low buzzing impossible to decipher. I couldn't concentrate.

"Bella," Alice said. I looked at her numbly.

"Bella, Edward is coming to get you. He and Emmett and Carlisle are going to take you somewhere, to hide you for a while."

"Edward is coming?" The words were like a life vest, holding my head above the flood.

"Yes, he's catching the first flight out of Seattle. We'll meet him at the airport, and you'll leave with him."

"But, my mother... he came here for my mother, Alice!" Despite Jasper, the hysteria bubbled up in my voice.

"Jasper and I will stay till she's safe."

"I can't win, Alice. You can't guard everyone I know forever. Don't you see what he's doing? He's not tracking me at all. He'll find someone, he'll hurt someone I love… Alice, I can't —"

"We'll catch him, Bella," she assured me.

"And what if you get hurt, Alice? Do you think that's okay with me? Do you think it's only my human family he can hurt me with?" Alice looked meaningfully at Jasper. A deep, heavy fog of lethargy washed over me, and my eyes closed without my permission. My mind struggled against the fog, realizing what was happening. I forced my eyes open and stood up, stepping away from Jasper's hand.

"I don't want to go back to sleep," I snapped.

I walked to my room and shut the door, slammed it really, so I could be free to go to pieces privately. This time Alice didn't follow me. For three and a half hours I stared at the wall, curled in a ball, rocking. My mind went around in circles, trying to come up with some way out of this nightmare. There was no escape, no reprieve. I could see only one possible end looming darkly in my future. The only question was how many other people would be hurt before I reached it.

The only solace, the only hope I had left, was knowing that I would see Edward soon. Maybe, if I could just see his face again, I would also be able to see the solution that eluded me now.

When the phone rang, I returned to the front room, a little ashamed of my behavior. I hoped I hadn't offended either of them, that they would know how

grateful I was for the sacrifices they were making on my account. Alice was talking as rapidly as ever, but what caught my attention was that, for the first time, Jasper was not in the room. I looked at the clock — it was five-thirty in the morning.

"They're just boarding their plane," Alice told me. "They'll land at nine-forty-five." Just a few more hours to keep breathing till he was here.

"Where's Jasper?"

"He went to check out."

"You aren't staying here?"

"No, we're relocating closer to your mother's house." My stomach twisted uneasily at her words.

But the phone rang again, distracting me. She looked surprised, but I was already walking forward, reaching hopefully for the phone.

"Hello?" Alice asked. "No, she's right here." She held the phone out to me. Your mother, she mouthed.

"Hello?"

"Bella? Bella?" It was my mother's voice, in a familiar tone I had heard a thousand times in my childhood, anytime I'd gotten too close to the edge of the sidewalk or strayed out of her sight in a crowded place. It was the sound of panic.

I sighed. I'd been expecting this, though I'd tried to make my message as unalarming as possible without lessening the urgency of it.

"Calm down, Mom," I said in my most soothing voice, walking slowly away from Alice. I wasn't sure if I could lie as convincingly with her eyes on me. "Everything is fine, okay? Just give me a minute and I'll explain everything, I promise."

I paused, surprised that she hadn't interrupted me yet.

"Mom?"

"Be very careful not to say anything until I tell you to." The voice I heard now was as unfamiliar as it was unexpected. It was a man's tenor voice, a very pleasant, generic voice — the kind of voice that you heard in the background of luxury car commercials. He spoke very quickly.

"Now, I don't need to hurt your mother, so please do exactly as I say, and she'll be fine." He paused for a minute while I listened in mute horror. "That's very good," he congratulated. "Now repeat after me, and do try to sound natural. Please say, 'No, Mom, stay where you are.'"

"No, Mom, stay where you are." My voice was barely more than a whisper.

"I can see this is going to be difficult." The voice was amused, still light and friendly. "Why don't you walk into another room now so your face doesn't ruin everything? There's no reason for your mother to suffer. As you're walking, please say, 'Mom, please listen to me.' Say it now."

"Mom, please listen to me," my voice pleaded. I walked very slowly to the bedroom, feeling Alice's worried stare on my back. I shut the door behind me, trying to think clearly through the terror that gripped my brain.

"There now, are you alone? Just answer yes or no."

"Yes."

"But they can still hear you, I'm sure."

"Yes."

"All right, then," the agreeable voice continued, "say, 'Mom, trust me.'"

"Mom, trust me."

"This worked out rather better than I expected. I was prepared to wait, but your mother arrived ahead of schedule. It's easier this way, isn't it? Less suspense, less anxiety for you."

I waited.

"Now I want you to listen very carefully. I'm going to need you to get away from your friends; do you think you can do that? Answer yes or no."

"No."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I was hoping you would be a little more creative than that. Do you think you could get away from them if your mother's life depended on it? Answer yes or no."

Somehow, there had to be a way. I remembered that we were going to the airport. Sky Harbor International Airport: crowded, confusingly laid out...

"Yes."

"That's better. I'm sure it won't be easy, but if I get the slightest hint that you have any company, well, that would be very bad for your mother," the friendly voice promised. "You must know enough about us by now to realize how quickly I would know if you tried to bring anyone along with you. And how little time I would need to deal with your mother if that was the case. Do you understand? Answer yes or no."

"Yes." My voice broke.

"Very good, Bella. Now this is what you have to do. I want you to go to your mother's house. Next to the phone there will be a number. Call it, and I'll tell you where to go from there." I already knew where I would go, and where this would end. But I would follow his instructions exactly. "Can you do that? Answer yes or no."

"Yes."

"Before noon, please, Bella. I haven't got all day," he said politely.

"Where's Phil?" I asked tersely.

"Ah, be careful now, Bella. Wait until I ask you to speak, please." I waited.

"It's important, now, that you don't make your friends suspicious when you go back to them. Tell them that

your mother called, and that you talked her out of coming home for the time being. Now repeat after me,

'Thank you, Mom.' Say it now."

"Thank you, Mom." The tears were coming. I tried to fight them back.

"Say, 'I love you, Mom, I'll see you soon.' Say it now."

"I love you, Mom." My voice was thick. "I'll see you soon," I promised.

"Goodbye, Bella. I look forward to seeing you again." He hung up. I held the phone to my ear. My joints were frozen with terror — I couldn't unbend my fingers to drop it.

I knew I had to think, but my head was filled with the sound of my mother's panic. Seconds ticked by while I fought for control. Slowly, slowly, my thoughts started to break past that brick wall of pain. To plan. For I had no choices now but one: to go to the mirrored room and die. I had no guarantees, nothing to give to keep my mother alive. I could only hope that James would be satisfied with winning the game, that beating Edward would be enough. Despair gripped me; there was no way to bargain, nothing I could offer or withhold that could influence him. But I still had no choice. I had to try.

I pushed the terror back as well as I could. My decision was made. It did no good to waste time agonizing over the outcome. I had to think clearly, because Alice and Jasper were waiting for me, and

evading them was absolutely essential, and absolutely impossible.

I was suddenly grateful that Jasper was gone. If he had been here to feel my anguish in the last five minutes, how could I have kept them from being suspicious? I choked back the dread, the anxiety, tried to stifle it. I couldn't afford it now. I didn't know when he would return. I concentrated on my escape. I had to hope that my familiarity with the airport would turn the odds in my favor. Somehow, I had to keep Alice away…

I knew Alice was in the other room waiting for me, curious. But I had to deal with one more thing in private, before Jasper was back. I had to accept that I wouldn't see Edward again, not even one last glimpse of his face to carry with me to the mirror room. I was going to hurt him, and I couldn't say goodbye. I let the waves of torture wash over me, have their way for a time. Then I pushed them back, too, and went to face Alice.

The only expression I could manage was a dull, dead look. I saw her alarm and I didn't wait for her to ask. I had just one script and I'd never manage improvisation now.

"My mom was worried, she wanted to come home. But it's okay, I convinced her to stay away." My voice was lifeless.

"We'll make sure she's fine, Bella, don't worry." I turned away; I couldn't let her see my face.

My eye fell on a blank page of the hotel stationery on the desk. I went to it slowly, a plan forming. There was an envelope there, too. That was good.

"Alice," I asked slowly, without turning, keeping my voice level. "If I write a letter for my mother, would you give it to her? Leave it at the house, I mean."

"Sure, Bella." Her voice was careful. She could see me coming apart at the seams. I had to keep my emotions under better control. I went into the bedroom again, and knelt next to the little bedside table to write.

"Edward," I wrote. My hand was shaking, the letters were hardly legible. I love you. I am so sorry. He has my mom, and I have to try. I know it may not work. I am so very, very sorry.

Don't be angry with Alice and Jasper. If I get away from them it will be a miracle. Tell them thank you for me. Alice especially, please. And please, please, don't come after him. That's what he wants. I think. I can't bear it if anyone has to be hurt because of me, especially you. Please, this is the only thing I can ask you now. For me. I love you. Forgive me.

Bella

I folded the letter carefully, and sealed it in the envelope. Eventually he would find it. I only hoped he would understand, and listen to me just this once.

And then I carefully sealed away my heart.

# Chapter 22

## HIDE-AND-SEEK

It had taken much less time than I'd thought — all the terror, the despair, the shattering of my heart. The minutes were ticking by more slowly than usual. Jasper still hadn't come back when I returned to Alice. I was afraid to be in the same room with her, afraid that she would guess... and afraid to hide from her for the same reason. I would have thought I was far beyond the ability to be surprised, my thoughts tortured and unstable, but I was surprised when I saw Alice bent over the desk, gripping the edge with two hands.

"Alice?"

She didn't react when I called her name, but her head was slowly rocking side to side, and I saw her face. Her eyes were blank, dazed... My thoughts flew to my mother. Was I already too late?

I hurried to her side, reaching out automatically to touch her hand.

"Alice!" Jasper's voice whipped, and then he was right behind her, his hands curling over hers, loosening them from their grip on the table. Across the room, the door swung shut with a low click.

"What is it?" he demanded.

She turned her face away from me, into his chest. "Bella," she said.

"I'm right here," I replied.

Her head twisted around, her eyes locking on mine, their expression still strangely blank. I realized at once that she hadn't been speaking to me, she'd been answering Jasper's question.

"What did you see?" I said — and there was no question in my flat, uncaring voice.

Jasper looked at me sharply. I kept my expression vacant and waited. His eyes were confused as they flickered swiftly between Alice's face and mine, feeling the chaos… for I could guess what Alice had seen now. I felt a tranquil atmosphere settle around me. I welcomed it, using it to keep my emotions disciplined, under control.

Alice, too, recovered herself.

"Nothing, really," she answered finally, her voice remarkably calm and convincing. "Just the same room as before."

She finally looked at me, her expression smooth and withdrawn. "Did you want breakfast?"

"No, I'll eat at the airport." I was very calm, too. I went to the bathroom to shower. Almost as if I were borrowing Jasper's strange extra sense, I could feel Alice's wild — though well-concealed — desperation to have me out of the room, to be alone with Jasper. So she could tell him that they were doing something wrong, that they were going to fail…

I got ready methodically, concentrating on each little task. I left my hair down, swirling around me,

covering my face. The peaceful mood Jasper created worked its way through me and helped me think clearly. Helped me plan. I dug through my bag until I found my sock full of money. I emptied it into my pocket.

I was anxious to get to the airport, and glad when we left by seven. I sat alone this time in the back of the dark car. Alice leaned against the door, her face toward Jasper but, behind her sunglasses, shooting glances in my direction every few seconds.

"Alice?" I asked indifferently.

She was wary. "Yes?"

"How does it work? The things that you see?" I stared out the side window, and my voice sounded bored. "Edward said it wasn't definite... that things change?" It was harder than I would have thought to say his name. That must have been what alerted Jasper, why a fresh wave of serenity filled the car.

"Yes, things change..." she murmured — hopefully, I thought. "Some things are more certain than others... like the weather. People are harder. I only see the course they're on while they're on it. Once they change their minds — make a new decision, no matter how small — the whole future shifts."

I nodded thoughtfully. "So you couldn't see James in Phoenix until he decided to come here."

"Yes," she agreed, wary again.

And she hadn't seen me in the mirror room with James until I'd made the decision to meet him there. I

tried not to think about what else she might have seen. I didn't want my panic to make Jasper more suspicious. They would be watching me twice as carefully now, anyway, after Alice's vision. This was going to be impossible.

We got to the airport. Luck was with me, or maybe it was just good odds. Edward's plane was landing in terminal four, the largest terminal, where most flights landed — so it wasn't surprising that his was. But it was the terminal I needed: the biggest, the most confusing. And there was a door on level three that might be the only chance.

We parked on the fourth floor of the huge garage. I led the way, for once more knowledgeable about my surroundings than they were. We took the elevator down to level three, where the passengers unloaded. Alice and Jasper spent a long time looking at the departing flights board. I could hear them discussing the pros and cons of New York, Atlanta, Chicago. Places I'd never seen. And would never see.

I waited for my opportunity, impatient, unable to stop my toe from tapping. We sat in the long rows of chairs by the metal detectors, Jasper and Alice pretending to people-watch but really watching me. Every inch I shifted in my seat was followed by a quick glance out of the corner of their eyes. It was hopeless. Should I run? Would they dare to stop me physically in this public place? Or would they simply follow?

I pulled the unmarked envelope out of my pocket and set it on top of Alice's black leather bag. She looked at me.

"My letter," I said. She nodded, tucking it under the top flap. He would find it soon enough.

The minutes passed and Edward's arrival grew closer. It was amazing how every cell in my body seemed to know he was coming, to long for his coming. That made it very hard. I found myself trying to think of excuses to stay, to see him first and then make my escape. But I knew that was impossible if I was going to have any chance to get away. Several times Alice offered to go get breakfast with me. Later, I told her, not yet.

I stared at the arrival board, watching as flight after flight arrived on time. The flight from Seattle crept closer to the top of the board. And then, when I had only thirty minutes to make my escape, the numbers changed. His plane was ten minutes early. I had no more time.

"I think I'll eat now," I said quickly.

Alice stood. "I'll come with you."

"Do you mind if Jasper comes instead?" I asked. "I'm feeling a little..." I didn't finish the sentence. My eyes were wild enough to convey what I didn't say.

Jasper stood up. Alice's eyes were confused, but — I saw to my relief—

not suspicious. She must be attributing the change in her vision to some maneuver of the tracker's rather than a betrayal by me.

Jasper walked silently beside me, his hand on the small of my back, as if he were guiding me. I

pretended a lack of interest in the first few airport cafes, my head scanning for what I really wanted. And there it was, around the corner, out of Alice's sharp sight: the level-three ladies' room.

"Do you mind?" I asked Jasper as we passed. "I'll just be a moment."

"I'll be right here," he said.

As soon as the door shut behind me, I was running. I remembered the time I had gotten lost from this bathroom, because it had two exits. Outside the far door it was only a short sprint to the elevators, and if Jasper stayed where he said he would, I'd never be in his line of sight. I didn't look behind me as I ran. This was my only chance, and even if he saw me, I had to keep going. People stared, but I ignored them. Around the corner the elevators were waiting, and I dashed forward, throwing my hand between the closing doors of a full elevator headed down. I squeezed in beside the irritated passengers, and checked to make sure that the button for level one had been pushed. It was already lit, and the doors closed.

As soon as the door opened I was off again, to the sound of annoyed murmurs behind me. I slowed myself as I passed the security guards by the luggage carousels, only to break into a run again as the exit doors came into view. I had no way of knowing if Jasper was looking for me yet. I would have only seconds if he was following my scent. I jumped out the automatic doors, nearly smacking into the glass when they opened too slowly.

Along the crowded curb there wasn't a cab in sight.

I had no time. Alice and Jasper were either about to realize I was gone, or they already had. They would find me in a heartbeat.

A shuttle to the Hyatt was just closing its doors a few feet behind me.

"Wait!" I called, running, waving at the driver.

"This is the shuttle to the Hyatt," the driver said in confusion as he opened the doors.

"Yes," I huffed, "that's where I'm going." I hurried up the steps. He looked askance at my luggage-less state, but then shrugged, not caring enough to ask.

Most of the seats were empty. I sat as far from the other travelers as possible, and watched out the window as first the sidewalk, and then the airport, drifted away. I couldn't help imagining Edward, where he would stand at the edge of the road when he found the end of my trail. I couldn't cry yet, I told myself. I still had a long way to go. My luck held. In front of the Hyatt, a tired-looking couple was getting their last suitcase out of the trunk of a cab. I jumped out of the shuttle and ran to the cab, sliding into the seat behind the driver. The tired couple and the shuttle driver stared at me.

I told the surprised cabbie my mother's address. "I need to get there as soon as possible."

"That's in Scottsdale," he complained.

I threw four twenties over the seat.

"Will that be enough?"

"Sure, kid, no problem."

I sat back against the seat, folding my arms across my lap. The familiar city began to rush around me, but I didn't look out the windows. I exerted myself to maintain control. I was determined not to lose myself at this point, now that my plan was successfully completed. There was no point in indulging in more terror, more anxiety. My path was set. I just had to follow it now.

So, instead of panicking, I closed my eyes and spent the twenty minutes'

drive with Edward.

I imagined that I had stayed at the airport to meet Edward. I visualized how I would stand on my toes, the sooner to see his face. How quickly, how gracefully he would move through the crowds of people separating us. And then I would run to close those last few feet between us — reckless as always — and I would be in his marble arms, finally safe. I wondered where we would have gone. North somewhere, so he could be outside in the day. Or maybe somewhere very remote, so we could lay in the sun together again. I imagined him by the shore, his skin sparkling like the sea. It wouldn't matter how long we had to hide. To be trapped in a hotel room with him would be a kind of heaven. So many questions I still had for him. I could talk to him forever, never sleeping, never leaving his side.

I could see his face so clearly now… almost hear his voice. And, despite all the horror and hopelessness, I

was fleetingly happy. So involved was I in my escapist daydreams, I lost all track of the seconds racing by.

"Hey, what was the number?"

The cabbie's question punctured my fantasy, letting all the colors run out of my lovely delusions. Fear, bleak and hard, was waiting to fill the empty space they left behind.

"Fifty-eight twenty-one." My voice sounded strangled. The cabbie looked at me, nervous that I was having an episode or something.

"Here we are, then." He was anxious to get me out of his car, probably hoping I wouldn't ask for my change.

"Thank you," I whispered. There was no need to be afraid, I reminded myself. The house was empty. I had to hurry; my mom was waiting for me, frightened, depending on me.

I ran to the door, reaching up automatically to grab the key under the eave. I unlocked the door. It was dark inside, empty, normal. I ran to the phone, turning on the kitchen light on my way. There, on the whiteboard, was a ten-digit number written in a small, neat hand. My fingers stumbled over the keypad, making mistakes. I had to hang up and start again. I concentrated only on the buttons this time, carefully pressing each one in turn. I was successful. I held the phone to my ear with a shaking hand. It rang only once.

"Hello, Bella," that easy voice answered. "That was very quick. I'm impressed."

"Is my mom all right?"

"She's perfectly fine. Don't worry, Bella, I have no quarrel with her. Unless you didn't come alone, of course." Light, amused.

"I'm alone." I'd never been more alone in my entire life.

"Very good. Now, do you know the ballet studio just around the corner from your home?"

"Yes. I know how to get there."

"Well, then, I'll see you very soon."

I hung up.

I ran from the room, through the door, out into the baking heat. There was no time to look back at my house, and I didn't want to see it as it was now — empty, a symbol of fear instead of sanctuary. The last person to walk through those familiar rooms was my enemy. From the corner of my eye, I could almost see my mother standing in the shade of the big eucalyptus tree where I'd played as a child. Or kneeling by the little plot of dirt around the mailbox, the cemetery of all the flowers she'd tried to grow. The memories were better than any reality I would see today. But I raced away from them, toward the corner, leaving everything behind me.

I felt so slow, like I was running through wet sand — I couldn't seem to get enough purchase from the

concrete. I tripped several times, once falling, catching myself with my hands, scraping them on the sidewalk, and then lurching up to plunge forward again. But at last I made it to the corner. Just another street now; I ran, sweat pouring down my face, gasping. The sun was hot on my skin, too bright as it bounced off the white concrete and blinded me. I felt dangerously exposed. More fiercely than I would have dreamed I was capable of, I wished for the green, protective forests of Forks… of home.

When I rounded the last corner, onto Cactus, I could see the studio, looking just as I remembered it. The parking lot in front was empty, the vertical blinds in all the windows drawn. I couldn't run anymore — I couldn't breathe; exertion and fear had gotten the best of me. I thought of my mother to keep my feet moving, one in front of the other. As I got closer, I could see the sign inside the door. It was handwritten on hot pink paper; it said the dance studio was closed for spring break. I touched the handle, tugged on it cautiously. It was unlocked. I fought to catch my breath, and opened the door.

The lobby was dark and empty, cool, the air conditioner thrumming. The plastic molded chairs were stacked along the walls, and the carpet smelled like shampoo. The west dance floor was dark, I could see through the open viewing window. The east dance floor, the bigger room, was lit. But the blinds were closed on the window.

Terror seized me so strongly that I was literally trapped by it. I couldn't make my feet move forward.

And then my mother's voice called.

"Bella? Bella?" That same tone of hysterical panic. I sprinted to the door, to the sound of her voice.

"Bella, you scared me! Don't you ever do that to me again!" Her voice continued as I ran into the long, high-ceilinged room.

I stared around me, trying to find where her voice was coming from. I heard her laugh, and I whirled to the sound.

There she was, on the TV screen, tousling my hair in relief. It was Thanksgiving, and I was twelve. We'd gone to see my grandmother in California, the last year before she died. We went to the beach one day, and I'd leaned too far over the edge of the pier. She'd seen my feet flailing, trying to reclaim my balance. "Bella? Bella?" she'd called to me in fear.

And then the TV screen was blue.

I turned slowly. He was standing very still by the back exit, so still I hadn't noticed him at first. In his hand was a remote control. We stared at each other for a long moment, and then he smiled.

He walked toward me, quite close, and then passed me to put the remote down next to the VCR. I turned carefully to watch him.

"Sorry about that, Bella, but isn't it better that your mother didn't really have to be involved in all this?" His voice was courteous, kind. And suddenly it hit me. My mother was safe. She was still in Florida. She'd never gotten my message. She'd never been

terrified by the dark red eyes in the abnormally pale face before me. She was safe.

"Yes," I answered, my voice saturated with relief.

"You don't sound angry that I tricked you."

"I'm not." My sudden high made me brave. What did it matter now? It would soon be over. Charlie and Mom would never be harmed, would never have to fear. I felt almost giddy. Some analytical part of my mind warned me that I was dangerously close to snapping from the stress.

"How odd. You really mean it." His dark eyes assessed me with interest. The irises were nearly black, just a hint of ruby around the edges. Thirsty. "I will give your strange coven this much, you humans can be quite interesting. I guess I can see the draw of observing you. It's amazing — some of you seem to have no sense of your own self-interest at all."

He was standing a few feet away from me, arms folded, looking at me curiously. There was no menace in his face or stance. He was so very average-looking, nothing remarkable about his face or body at all. Just the white skin, the circled eyes I'd grown so used to. He wore a pale blue, long-sleeved shirt and faded blue jeans.

"I suppose you're going to tell me that your boyfriend will avenge you?" he asked, hopefully it seemed to me.

"No, I don't think so. At least, I asked him not to."

"And what was his reply to that?"

"I don't know." It was strangely easy to converse with this genteel hunter. "I left him a letter."

"How romantic, a last letter. And do you think he will honor it?" His voice was just a little harder now, a hint of sarcasm marring his polite tone.

"I hope so."

"Hmmm. Well, our hopes differ then. You see, this was all just a little too easy, too quick. To be quite honest, I'm disappointed. I expected a much greater challenge. And, after all, I only needed a little luck." I waited in silence.

"When Victoria couldn't get to your father, I had her find out more about you. There was no sense in running all over the planet chasing you down when I could comfortably wait for you in a place of my choosing. So, after I talked to Victoria, I decided to come to Phoenix to pay your mother a visit. I'd heard you say you were going home. At first, I never dreamed you meant it. But then I wondered. Humans can be very predictable; they like to be somewhere familiar, somewhere safe. And wouldn't it be the perfect ploy, to go to the last place you should be when you're hiding — the place that you said you'd be.

"But of course I wasn't sure, it was just a hunch. I usually get a feeling about the prey that I'm hunting, a sixth sense, if you will. I listened to your message when I got to your mother's house, but of course I couldn't be sure where you'd called from. It was very useful to have your number, but you could have been

in Antarctica for all I knew, and the game wouldn't work unless you were close by.

"Then your boyfriend got on a plane to Phoenix. Victoria was monitoring them for me, naturally; in a game with this many players, I couldn't be working alone. And so they told me what I'd hoped, that you were here after all. I was prepared; I'd already been through your charming home movies. And then it was simply a matter of the bluff.

"Very easy, you know, not really up to my standards. So, you see, I'm hoping you're wrong about your boyfriend. Edward, isn't it?" I didn't answer. The bravado was wearing off. I sensed that he was coming to the end of his gloat. It wasn't meant for me anyway. There was no glory in beating me, a weak human.

"Would you mind, very much, if I left a little letter of my own for your Edward?"

He took a step back and touched a palm-sized digital video camera balanced carefully on top of the stereo. A small red light indicated that it was already running. He adjusted it a few times, widened the frame. I stared at him in horror.

"I'm sorry, but I just don't think he'll be able to resist hunting me after he watches this. And I wouldn't want him to miss anything. It was all for him, of course. You're simply a human, who unfortunately was in the wrong place, at the wrong time, and indisputably running with the wrong crowd, I might add."

He stepped toward me, smiling. "Before we begin..." I felt a curl of nausea in the pit of my stomach as he spoke. This was something I had not anticipated.

"I would just like to rub it in, just a little bit. The answer was there all along, and I was so afraid Edward would see that and ruin my fun. It happened once, oh, ages ago. The one and only time my prey escaped me.

"You see, the vampire who was so stupidly fond of this little victim made the choice that your Edward was too weak to make. When the old one knew I was after his little friend, he stole her from the asylum where he worked

— I never will understand the obsession some vampires seem to form with you humans — and as soon as he freed her he made her safe. She didn't even seem to notice the pain, poor little creature. She'd been stuck in that black hole of a cell for so long. A hundred years earlier and she would have been burned at the stake for her visions. In the nineteen-twenties it was the asylum and the shock treatments. When she opened her eyes, strong with her fresh youth, it was like she'd never seen the sun before. The old vampire made her a strong new vampire, and there was no reason for me to touch her then." He sighed. "I destroyed the old one in vengeance."

"Alice," I breathed, astonished.

"Yes, your little friend. I was surprised to see her in the clearing. So I guess her coven ought to be able to derive some comfort from this experience. I get you,

but they get her. The one victim who escaped me, quite an honor, actually.

"And she did smell so delicious. I still regret that I never got to taste... She smelled even better than you do. Sorry — I don't mean to be offensive. You have a very nice smell. Floral, somehow..." He took another step toward me, till he was just inches away. He lifted a lock of my hair and sniffed at it delicately. Then he gently patted the strand back into place, and I felt his cool fingertips against my throat. He reached up to stroke my cheek once quickly with his thumb, his face curious. I wanted so badly to run, but I was frozen. I couldn't even flinch away.

"No," he murmured to himself as he dropped his hand, "I don't understand." He sighed. "Well, I suppose we should get on with it. And then I can call your friends and tell them where to find you, and my little message."

I was definitely sick now. There was pain coming, I could see it in his eyes. It wouldn't be enough for him to win, to feed and go. There would be no quick end like I'd been counting on. My knees began to shake, and I was afraid I was going to fall.

He stepped back, and began to circle, casually, as if he were trying to get a better view of a statue in a museum. His face was still open and friendly as he decided where to start.

Then he slumped forward, into a crouch I recognized, and his pleasant smile slowly widened, grew, till it wasn't a smile at all but a contortion of teeth, exposed and glistening.

I couldn't help myself— I tried to run. As useless as I knew it would be, as weak as my knees already were, panic took over and I bolted for the emergency door.

He was in front of me in a flash. I didn't see if he used his hand or his foot, it was too fast. A crushing blow struck my chest — I felt myself flying backward, and then heard the crunch as my head bashed into the mirrors. The glass buckled, some of the pieces shattering and splintering on the floor beside me.

I was too stunned to feel the pain. I couldn't breathe yet. He walked toward me slowly.

"That's a very nice effect," he said, examining the mess of glass, his voice friendly again. "I thought this room would be visually dramatic for my little film. That's why I picked this place to meet you. It's perfect, isn't it?"

I ignored him, scrambling on my hands and knees, crawling toward the other door.

He was over me at once, his foot stepping down hard on my leg. I heard the sickening snap before I felt it. But then I did feel it, and I couldn't hold back my scream of agony. I twisted up to reach for my leg, and he was standing over me, smiling.

"Would you like to rethink your last request?" he asked pleasantly. His toe nudged my broken leg and I heard a piercing scream. With a shock, I realized it was mine.

"Wouldn't you rather have Edward try to find me?" he prompted.

"No!" I croaked. "No, Edward, don't—" And then something smashed into my face, throwing me back into the broken mirrors.

Over the pain of my leg, I felt the sharp rip across my scalp where the glass cut into it. And then the warm wetness began to spread through my hair with alarming speed. I could feel it soaking the shoulder of my shirt, hear it dripping on the wood below. The smell of it twisted my stomach.

Through the nausea and dizziness I saw something that gave me a sudden, final shred of hope. His eyes, merely intent before, now burned with an uncontrollable need. The blood — spreading crimson across my white shirt, pooling rapidly on the floor — was driving him mad with thirst. No matter his original intentions, he couldn't draw this out much longer. Let it be quick now, was all I could hope as the flow of blood from my head sucked my consciousness away with it. My eyes were closing. I heard, as if from underwater, the final growl of the hunter. I could see, through the long tunnels my eyes had become, his dark shape coming toward me. With my last effort, my hand instinctively raised to protect my face. My eyes closed, and I drifted.

# Chapter 23

## THE ANGEL

As I drifted, I dreamed.

Where I floated, under the dark water, I heard the happiest sound my mind could conjure up — as beautiful, as uplifting, as it was ghastly. It was another snarl; a deeper, wilder roar that rang with fury. I was brought back, almost to the surface, by a sharp pain slashing my upraised hand, but I couldn't find my way back far enough to open my eyes. And then I knew I was dead.

Because, through the heavy water, I heard the sound of an angel calling my name, calling me to the only heaven I wanted.

"Oh no, Bella, no!" the angel's voice cried in horror. Behind that longed-for sound was another noise — an awful tumult that my mind shied away from. A vicious bass growling, a shocking snapping sound, and a high keening, suddenly breaking off...

I tried to concentrate on the angel's voice instead.

"Bella, please! Bella, listen to me, please, please, Bella, please!" he begged.

Yes, I wanted to say. Anything. But I couldn't find my lips.

"Carlisle!" the angel called, agony in his perfect voice. "Bella, Bella, no, oh please, no, no!" And the angel was sobbing tearless, broken sobs. The angel

shouldn't weep, it was wrong. I tried to find him, to tell him everything was fine, but the water was so deep, it was pressing on me, and I couldn't breathe.

There was a point of pressure against my head. It hurt. Then, as that pain broke through the darkness to me, other pains came, stronger pains. I cried out, gasping, breaking through the dark pool.

"Bella!" the angel cried.

"She's lost some blood, but the head wound isn't deep," a calm voice informed me. "Watch out for her leg, it's broken." A howl of rage strangled on the angel's lips.

I felt a sharp stab in my side. This couldn't be heaven, could it? There was too much pain for that.

"Some ribs, too, I think," the methodical voice continued. But the sharp pains were fading. There was a new pain, a scalding pain in my hand that was overshadowing everything else.

Someone was burning me.

"Edward." I tried to tell him, but my voice was so heavy and slow. I couldn't understand myself.

"Bella, you're going to be fine. Can you hear me, Bella? I love you."

"Edward," I tried again. My voice was a little clearer.

"Yes, I'm here."

"It hurts," I whimpered.

"I know, Bella, I know" — and then, away from me, anguished — "can't you do anything?"

"My bag, please... Hold your breath, Alice, it will help," Carlisle promised.

"Alice?" I groaned.

"She's here, she knew where to find you."

"My hand hurts," I tried to tell him.

"I know, Bella. Carlisle will give you something, it will stop."

"My hand is burning!" I screamed, finally breaking through the last of the darkness, my eyes fluttering open. I couldn't see his face, something dark and warm was clouding my eyes. Why couldn't they see the fire and put it out?

His voice was frightened. "Bella?"

"The fire! Someone stop the fire!" I screamed as it burned me.

"Carlisle! Her hand!"

"He bit her." Carlisle's voice was no longer calm, it was appalled. I heard Edward catch his breath in horror.

"Edward, you have to do it." It was Alice's voice, close by my head. Cool fingers brushed at the wetness in my eyes.

"No!" he bellowed.

"Alice," I moaned.

"There may be a chance," Carlisle said.

"What?" Edward begged.

"See if you can suck the venom back out. The wound is fairly clean." As Carlisle spoke, I could feel more pressure on my head, something poking and pulling at my scalp. The pain of it was lost in the pain of the fire.

"Will that work?" Alice's voice was strained.

"I don't know," Carlisle said. "But we have to hurry."

"Carlisle, I..." Edward hesitated. "I don't know if I can do that." There was agony in his beautiful voice again.

"It's your decision, Edward, either way. I can't help you. I have to get this bleeding stopped here if you're going to be taking blood from her hand."

I writhed in the grip of the fiery torture, the movement making the pain in my leg flare sickeningly.

"Edward!" I screamed. I realized my eyes were closed again. I opened them, desperate to find his face. And I found him. Finally, I could see his perfect face, staring at me, twisted into a mask of indecision and pain.

"Alice, get me something to brace her leg!" Carlisle was bent over me, working on my head. "Edward, you must do it now, or it will be too late." Edward's face was drawn. I watched his eyes as the doubt was suddenly replaced with a blazing determination. His jaw tightened. I felt his cool, strong fingers on my burning hand, locking it in place. Then his head bent

over it, and his cold lips pressed against my skin. At first the pain was worse. I screamed and thrashed against the cool hands that held me back. I heard Alice's voice, trying to calm me. Something heavy held my leg to the floor, and Carlisle had my head locked in the vise of his stone arms.

Then, slowly, my writhing calmed as my hand grew more and more numb. The fire was dulling, focusing into an ever-smaller point.

I felt my consciousness slipping as the pain subsided. I was afraid to fall into the black waters again, afraid I would lose him in the darkness.

"Edward," I tried to say, but I couldn't hear my voice. They could hear me.

"He's right here, Bella."

"Stay, Edward, stay with me..."

"I will." His voice was strained, but somehow triumphant. I sighed contentedly. The fire was gone, the other pains dulled by a sleepiness seeping through my body.

"Is it all out?" Carlisle asked from somewhere far away.

"Her blood tastes clean," Edward said quietly. "I can taste the morphine."

"Bella?" Carlisle called to me.

I tried to answer. "Mmmmm?"

"Is the fire gone?"

"Yes," I sighed. "Thank you, Edward."

"I love you," he answered.

"I know," I breathed, so tired.

I heard my favorite sound in the world: Edward's quiet laugh, weak with relief.

"Bella?" Carlisle asked again.

I frowned; I wanted to sleep. "What?"

"Where is your mother?"

"In Florida," I sighed. "He tricked me, Edward. He watched our videos." The outrage in my voice was pitifully frail.

But that reminded me.

"Alice." I tried to open my eyes. "Alice, the video — he knew you, Alice, he knew where you came from." I meant to speak urgently, but my voice was feeble. "I smell gasoline," I added, surprised through the haze in my brain.

"It's time to move her," Carlisle said.

"No, I want to sleep," I complained.

"You can sleep, sweetheart, I'll carry you," Edward soothed me. And I was in his arms, cradled against his chest — floating, all the pain gone.

"Sleep now, Bella" were the last words I heard.

# Chapter 24

## AN IMPASSE

My eyes opened to a bright, white light. I was in an unfamiliar room, a white room. The wall beside me was covered in long vertical blinds; over my head, the glaring lights blinded me. I was propped up on a hard, uneven bed — a bed with rails. The pillows were flat and lumpy. There was an annoying beeping sound somewhere close by. I hoped that meant I was still alive. Death shouldn't be this uncomfortable.

My hands were all twisted up with clear tubes, and something was taped across my face, under my nose. I lifted my hand to rip it off.

"No, you don't." And cool fingers caught my hand.

"Edward?" I turned my head slightly, and his exquisite face was just inches from mine, his chin resting on the edge of my pillow. I realized again that I was alive, this time with gratitude and elation. "Oh, Edward, I'm so sorry!"

"Shhhh," he shushed me. "Everything's all right now."

"What happened?" I couldn't remember clearly, and my mind rebelled against me as I tried to recall.

"I was almost too late. I could have been too late," he whispered, his voice tormented.

"I was so stupid, Edward. I thought he had my mom."

"He tricked us all."

"I need to call Charlie and my mom," I realized through the haze.

"Alice called them. Renée is here — well, here in the hospital. She's getting something to eat right now."

"She's here?" I tried to sit up, but the spinning in my head accelerated, and his hand pushed me gently down onto the pillows.

"She'll be back soon," he promised. "And you need to stay still."

"But what did you tell her?" I panicked. I had no interest in being soothed. My mom was here and I was recovering from a vampire attack. "Why did you tell her I'm here?"

"You fell down two flights of stairs and through a window." He paused.

"You have to admit, it could happen."

I sighed, and it hurt. I stared down at my body under the sheet, the huge lump that was my leg.

"How bad am I?" I asked.

"You have a broken leg, four broken ribs, some cracks in your skull, bruises covering every inch of your skin, and you've lost a lot of blood. They gave you a few transfusions. I didn't like it — it made you smell all wrong for a while."

"That must have been a nice change for you."

"No, I like how you smell."

"How did you do it?" I asked quietly. He knew what I meant at once.

"I'm not sure." He looked away from my wondering eyes, lifting my gauze-wrapped hand from the bed and holding it gently in his, careful not to disrupt the wire connecting me to one of the monitors. I waited patiently for the rest.

He sighed without returning my gaze. "It was impossible... to stop," he whispered. "Impossible. But I did." He looked up finally, with half a smile. "I must love you."

"Don't I taste as good as I smell?" I smiled in response. That hurt my face.

"Even better — better than I'd imagined."

"I'm sorry," I apologized.

He raised his eyes to the ceiling. "Of all the things to apologize for."

"What should I apologize for?"

"For very nearly taking yourself away from me forever."

"I'm sorry," I apologized again.

"I know why you did it." His voice was comforting. "It was still irrational, of course. You should have waited for me, you should have told me."

"You wouldn't have let me go."

"No," he agreed in a grim tone, "I wouldn't." Some very unpleasant memories were beginning to come back to me. I shuddered, and then winced.

He was instantly anxious. "Bella, what's wrong?"

"What happened to James?"

"After I pulled him off you, Emmett and Jasper took care of him." There was a fierce note of regret in his voice.

This confused me. "I didn't see Emmett and Jasper there."

"They had to leave the room... there was a lot of blood."

"But you stayed."

"Yes, I stayed."

"And Alice, and Carlisle..." I said in wonder.

"They love you, too, you know."

A flash of painful images from the last time I'd seen Alice reminded me of something. "Did Alice see the tape?" I asked anxiously.

"Yes." A new sound darkened his voice, a tone of sheer hatred.

"She was always in the dark, that's why she didn't remember."

"I know. She understands now." His voice was even, but his face was black with fury.

I tried to reach his face with my free hand, but something stopped me. I glanced down to see the IV pulling at my hand.

"Ugh." I winced.

"What is it?" he asked anxiously — distracted, but not enough. The bleakness did not entirely leave his eyes.

"Needles," I explained, looking away from the one in my hand. I concentrated on a warped ceiling tile and tried to breathe deeply despite the ache in my ribs.

"Afraid of a needle," he muttered to himself under his breath, shaking his head. "Oh, a sadistic vampire, intent on torturing her to death, sure, no problem, she runs off to meet him. An IV, on the other hand..." I rolled my eyes. I was pleased to discover that this reaction, at least, was pain-free. I decided to change the subject.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

He stared at me, first confusion and then hurt touching his eyes. His brows pulled together as he frowned. "Do you want me to leave?"

"No!" I protested, horrified by the thought. "No, I meant, why does my mother think you're here? I need to have my story straight before she gets back."

"Oh," he said, and his forehead smoothed back into marble. "I came to Phoenix to talk some sense into you, to convince you to come back to Forks." His wide eyes were so earnest and sincere, I almost believed him myself. "You agreed to see me, and you drove out to the hotel where I was staying with Carlisle and

Alice — of course I was here with parental supervision," he inserted virtuously, "but you tripped on the stairs on the way to my room and... well, you know the rest. You don't need to remember any details, though; you have a good excuse to be a little muddled about the finer points."

I thought about it for a moment. "There are a few flaws with that story. Like no broken windows."

"Not really," he said. "Alice had a little bit too much fun fabricating evidence. It's all been taken care of very convincingly — you could probably sue the hotel if you wanted to. You have nothing to worry about," he promised, stroking my cheek with the lightest of touches.

"Your only job now is to heal."

I wasn't so lost to the soreness or the fog of medication that I didn't respond to his touch. The beeping of the monitor jumped around erratically — now he wasn't the only one who could hear my heart misbehave.

"That's going to be embarrassing," I muttered to myself. He chuckled, and a speculative look came into his eye. "Hmm, I wonder..." He leaned in slowly; the beeping noise accelerated wildly before his lips even touched me. But when they did, though with the most gentle of pressure, the beeping stopped altogether.

He pulled back abruptly, his anxious expression turning to relief as the monitor reported the restarting of my heart.

"It seems that I'm going to have to be even more careful with you than usual." He frowned.

"I was not finished kissing you," I complained. "Don't make me come over there."

He grinned, and bent to press his lips lightly to mine. The monitor went wild.

But then his lips were taut. He pulled away.

"I think I hear your mother," he said, grinning again.

"Don't leave me," I cried, an irrational surge of panic flooding through me. I couldn't let him go — he might disappear from me again. He read the terror in my eyes for a short second. "I won't," he promised solemnly, and then he smiled. "I'll take a nap." He moved from the hard plastic chair by my side to the turquoise faux-leather recliner at the foot of my bed, leaning it all the way back, and closing his eyes. He was perfectly still.

"Don't forget to breathe," I whispered sarcastically. He took a deep breath, his eyes still closed.

I could hear my mother now. She was talking to someone, maybe a nurse, and she sounded tired and upset. I wanted to jump out of the bed and run to her, to calm her, promise that everything was fine. But I wasn't in any sort of shape for jumping, so I waited impatiently.

The door opened a crack, and she peeked through.

"Mom!" I whispered, my voice full of love and relief. She took in Edward's still form on the recliner, and tiptoed to my bedside.

"He never leaves, does he?" she mumbled to herself.

"Mom, I'm so glad to see you!"

She bent down to hug me gently, and I felt warm tears falling on my cheeks.

"Bella, I was so upset!"

"I'm sorry, Mom. But everything's fine now, it's okay," I comforted her.

"I'm just glad to finally see your eyes open." She sat on the edge of my bed.

I suddenly realized I didn't have any idea when it was. "How long have they been closed?"

"It's Friday, hon, you've been out for a while."

"Friday?" I was shocked. I tried to remember what day it had been when...

but I didn't want to think about that.

"They had to keep you sedated for a while, honey — you've got a lot of injuries."

"I know." I could feel them.

"You're lucky Dr. Cullen was there. He's such a nice man... very young, though. And he looks more like a model than a doctor..."

"You met Carlisle?"

"And Edward's sister Alice. She's a lovely girl."

"She is," I agreed wholeheartedly.

She glanced over her shoulder at Edward, lying with his eyes closed in the chair. "You didn't tell me you had such good friends in Forks." I cringed, and then moaned.

"What hurts?" she demanded anxiously, turning back to me. Edward's eyes flashed to my face.

"It's fine," I assured them. "I just have to remember not to move." He lapsed back into his phony slumber.

I took advantage of my mother's momentary distraction to keep the subject from returning to my less-than-candid behavior. "Where's Phil?" I asked quickly.

"Florida — oh, Bella! You'll never guess! Just when we were about to leave, the best news!"

"Phil got signed?" I guessed.

"Yes! How did you guess! The Suns, can you believe it?"

"That's great, Mom," I said as enthusiastically as I could manage, though I had little idea what that meant.

"And you'll like Jacksonville so much," she gushed while I stared at her vacantly. "I was a little bit worried when Phil started talking about Akron, what with the snow and everything, because you know how I hate the cold, but now Jacksonville! It's always

sunny, and the humidity really isn't that bad. We found the cutest house, yellow, with white trim, and a porch just like in an old movie, and this huge oak tree, and it's just a few minutes from the ocean, and you'll have your own bathroom —"

"Wait, Mom!" I interrupted. Edward still had his eyes closed, but he looked too tense to pass as asleep. "What are you talking about? I'm not going to Florida. I live in Forks."

"But you don't have to anymore, silly," she laughed. "Phil will be able to be around so much more now… we've talked about it a lot, and what I'm going to do is trade off on the away games, half the time with you, half the time with him."

"Mom." I hesitated, wondering how best to be diplomatic about this. "I want to live in Forks. I'm already settled in at school, and I have a couple of girlfriends" — she glanced toward Edward again when I reminded her of friends, so I tried another direction — "and Charlie needs me. He's just all alone up there, and he can't cook at all."

"You want to stay in Forks?" she asked, bewildered. The idea was inconceivable to her. And then her eyes flickered back toward Edward.

"Why?"

"I told you — school, Charlie — ouch!" I'd shrugged. Not a good idea. Her hands fluttered helplessly over me, trying to find a safe place to pat. She made do with my forehead; it was unbandaged.

"Bella, honey, you hate Forks," she reminded me.

"It's not so bad."

She frowned and looked back and forth between Edward and me, this time very deliberately.

"Is it this boy?" she whispered.

I opened my mouth to lie, but her eyes were scrutinizing my face, and I knew she would see through that.

"He's part of it," I admitted. No need to confess how big a part. "So, have you had a chance to talk with Edward?" I asked.

"Yes." She hesitated, looking at his perfectly still form. "And I want to talk to you about that."

Uh-oh. "What about?" I asked.

"I think that boy is in love with you," she accused, keeping her voice low.

"I think so, too," I confided.

"And how do you feel about him?" She only poorly concealed the raging curiosity in her voice.

I sighed, looking away. As much as I loved my mom, this was not a conversation I wanted to have with her. "I'm pretty crazy about him." There — that sounded like something a teenager with her first boyfriend might say.

"Well, he seems very nice, and, my goodness, he's incredibly good-looking, but you're so young, Bella..."

Her voice was unsure; as far as I could remember, this was the first time since I was eight that she'd come close to trying to sound like a parental authority. I recognized the reasonable-but-firm tone of voice from talks I'd had with her about men.

"I know that, Mom. Don't worry about it. It's just a crush," I soothed her.

"That's right," she agreed, easily pleased.

Then she sighed and glanced guiltily over her shoulder at the big, round clock on the wall.

"Do you need to go?"

She bit her lip. "Phil's supposed to call in a little while... I didn't know you were going to wake up..."

"No problem, Mom." I tried to tone down the relief so she wouldn't get her feelings hurt. "I won't be alone."

"I'll be back soon. I've been sleeping here, you know," she announced, proud of herself.

"Oh, Mom, you don't have to do that! You can sleep at home — I'll never notice." The swirl of painkillers in my brain was making it hard to concentrate even now, though, apparently, I'd been sleeping for days.

"I was too nervous," she admitted sheepishly. "There's been some crime in the neighborhood, and I don't like being there alone."

"Crime?" I asked in alarm.

"Someone broke into that dance studio around the corner from the house and burned it to the ground —

there's nothing left at all! And they left a stolen car right out front. Do you remember when you used to dance there, honey?"

"I remember." I shivered, and winced.

"I can stay, baby, if you need me."

"No, Mom, I'll be fine. Edward will be with me." She looked like that might be why she wanted to stay. "I'll be back tonight." It sounded as much like a warning as it sounded like a promise, and she glanced at Edward again as she said it.

"I love you, Mom."

"I love you, too, Bella. Try to be more careful when you walk, honey, I don't want to lose you."

Edward's eyes stayed closed, but a wide grin flashed across his face. A nurse came bustling in then to check all my tubes and wires. My mother kissed my forehead, patted my gauze-wrapped hand, and left. The nurse was checking the paper readout on my heart monitor.

"Are you feeling anxious, honey? Your heart rate got a little high there."

"I'm fine," I assured her.

"I'll tell your RN that you're awake. She'll be in to see you in a minute."

As soon as she closed the door, Edward was at my side.

"You stole a car?" I raised my eyebrows.

He smiled, unrepentant. "It was a good car, very fast."

"How was your nap?" I asked.

"Interesting." His eyes narrowed.

"What?"

He looked down while he answered. "I'm surprised. I thought Florida... and your mother... well, I thought that's what you would want." I stared at him uncomprehendingly. "But you'd be stuck inside all day in Florida. You'd only be able to come out at night, just like a real vampire."

He almost smiled, but not quite. And then his face was grave. "I would stay in Forks, Bella. Or somewhere like it," he explained. "Someplace where I couldn't hurt you anymore."

It didn't sink in at first. I continued to stare at him blankly as the words one by one clicked into place in my head like a ghastly puzzle. I was barely conscious of the sound of my heart accelerating, though, as my breathing became hyperventilation, I was aware of the sharp aching in my protesting ribs.

He didn't say anything; he watched my face warily as the pain that had nothing to do with broken bones, pain that was infinitely worse, threatened to crush me.

And then another nurse walked purposefully into the room. Edward sat still as stone as she took in my expression with a practiced eye before turning to the monitors.

"Time for more pain meds, sweetheart?" she asked kindly, tapping the IV

feed.

"No, no," I mumbled, trying to keep the agony out of my voice. "I don't need anything." I couldn't afford to close my eyes now.

"No need to be brave, honey. It's better if you don't get too stressed out; you need to rest." She waited, but I just shook my head.

"Okay," she sighed. "Hit the call button when you're ready." She gave Edward a stern look, and threw one more anxious glance at the machinery, before leaving.

His cool hands were on my face; I stared at him with wild eyes.

"Shhh, Bella, calm down."

"Don't leave me," I begged in a broken voice.

"I won't," he promised. "Now relax before I call the nurse back to sedate you."

But my heart couldn't slow.

"Bella." He stroked my face anxiously. "I'm not going anywhere. I'll be right here as long as you need me."

"Do you swear you won't leave me?" I whispered. I tried to control the gasping, at least. My ribs were throbbing.

He put his hands on either side of my face and brought his face close to mine. His eyes were wide

and serious. "I swear." The smell of his breath was soothing. It seemed to ease the ache of my breathing. He continued to hold my gaze while my body slowly relaxed and the beeping returned to a normal pace. His eyes were dark, closer to black than gold today.

"Better?" he asked.

"Yes," I said cautiously.

He shook his head and muttered something unintelligible. I thought I picked out the word "overreaction."

"Why did you say that?" I whispered, trying to keep my voice from shaking. "Are you tired of having to save me all the time? Do you want me to go away?"

"No, I don't want to be without you, Bella, of course not. Be rational. And I have no problem with saving you, either — if it weren't for the fact that I was the one putting you in danger… that I'm the reason that you're here."

"Yes, you are the reason." I frowned. "The reason I'm here — alive."

"Barely." His voice was just a whisper. "Covered in gauze and plaster and hardly able to move."

"I wasn't referring to my most recent near-death experience," I said, growing irritated. "I was thinking of the others — you can take your pick. If it weren't for you, I would be rotting away in the Forks cemetery."

He winced at my words, but the haunted look didn't leave his eyes.

"That's not the worst part, though," he continued to whisper. He acted as if I hadn't spoken. "Not seeing you there on the floor… crumpled and broken." His voice was choked. "Not thinking I was too late. Not even hearing you scream in pain — all those unbearable memories that I'll carry with me for the rest of eternity. No, the very worst was feeling…

knowing that I couldn't stop. Believing that I was going to kill you myself."

"But you didn't."

"I could have. So easily."

I knew I needed to stay calm… but he was trying to talk himself into leaving me, and the panic fluttered in my lungs, trying to get out.

"Promise me," I whispered.

"What?"

"You know what." I was starting to get angry now. He was so stubbornly determined to dwell on the negative.

He heard the change in my tone. His eyes tightened. "I don't seem to be strong enough to stay away from you, so I suppose that you'll get your way… whether it kills you or not," he added roughly.

"Good." He hadn't promised, though — a fact that I had not missed. The panic was only barely contained;

I had no strength left to control the anger. "You told me how you stopped... now I want to know why," I demanded.

"Why?" he repeated warily.

"Why you did it. Why didn't you just let the venom spread? By now I would be just like you."

Edward's eyes seemed to turn flat black, and I remembered that this was something he'd never intended me to know. Alice must have been preoccupied by the things she'd learned about herself... or she'd been very careful with her thoughts around him — clearly, he'd had no idea that she'd filled me in on the mechanics of vampire conversions. He was surprised, and infuriated. His nostrils flared, his mouth looked as if it was chiseled from stone.

He wasn't going to answer, that much was clear.

"I'll be the first to admit that I have no experience with relationships," I said. "But it just seems logical... a man and woman have to be somewhat equal... as in, one of them can't always be swooping in and saving the other one. They have to save each other equally." He folded his arms on the side of my bed and rested his chin on his arms. His expression was smooth, the anger reined in. Evidently he'd decided he wasn't angry with me. I hoped I'd get a chance to warn Alice before he caught up with her.

"You have saved me," he said quietly.

"I can't always be Lois Lane," I insisted. "I want to be Superman, too."

"You don't know what you're asking." His voice was soft; he stared intently at the edge of the pillowcase.

"I think I do."

"Bella, you don't know. I've had almost ninety years to think about this, and I'm still not sure."

"Do you wish that Carlisle hadn't saved you?"

"No, I don't wish that." He paused before continuing. "But my life was over. I wasn't giving anything up."

"You are my life. You're the only thing it would hurt me to lose." I was getting better at this. It was easy to admit how much I needed him. He was very calm, though. Decided.

"I can't do it, Bella. I won't do that to you."

"Why not?" My throat rasped and the words weren't as loud as I'd meant them to be. "Don't tell me it's too hard! After today, or I guess it was a few days ago... anyway, after that, it should be nothing." He glared at me.

"And the pain?" he asked.

I blanched. I couldn't help it. But I tried to keep my expression from showing how clearly I remembered the feeling... the fire in my veins.

"That's my problem," I said. "I can handle it."

"It's possible to take bravery to the point where it becomes insanity."

"It's not an issue. Three days. Big deal."

Edward grimaced again as my words reminded him that I was more informed than he had ever intended me to be. I watched him repress the anger, watched as his eyes grew speculative.

"Charlie?" he asked curtly. "Renée?"

Minutes passed in silence as I struggled to answer his question. I opened my mouth, but no sound came out. I closed it again. He waited, and his expression became triumphant because he knew I had no true answer.

"Look, that's not an issue either," I finally muttered; my voice was as unconvincing as it always was when I lied. "Renée has always made the choices that work for her — she'd want me to do the same. And Charlie's resilient, he's used to being on his own. I can't take care of them forever. I have my own life to live."

"Exactly," he snapped. "And I won't end it for you."

"If you're waiting for me to be on my deathbed, I've got news for you! I was just there!"

"You're going to recover," he reminded me.

I took a deep breath to calm myself, ignoring the spasm of pain it triggered. I stared at him, and he stared back. There was no compromise in his face.

"No," I said slowly. "I'm not."

His forehead creased. "Of course you are. You may have a scar or two..."

"You're wrong," I insisted. "I'm going to die."

"Really, Bella." He was anxious now. "You'll be out of here in a few days. Two week at most."

I glared at him. "I may not die now… but I'm going to die sometime. Every minute of the day, I get closer. And I'm going to get old." He frowned as what I was saying sunk in, pressing his long fingers to his temples and closing his eyes. "That's how it's supposed to happen. How it should happen. How it would have happened if I didn't exist — and I shouldn't exist."

I snorted. He opened his eyes in surprise. "That's stupid. That's like going to someone who's just won the lottery, taking their money, and saying, 'Look, let's just go back to how things should be. It's better that way.' And I'm not buying it."

"I'm hardly a lottery prize," he growled.

"That's right. You're much better."

He rolled his eyes and set his lips. "Bella, we're not having this discussion anymore. I refuse to damn you to an eternity of night and that's the end of it."

"If you think that's the end, then you don't know me very well," I warned him. "You're not the only vampire I know."

His eyes went black again. "Alice wouldn't dare." And for a moment he looked so frightening that I couldn't help but believe it — I couldn't imagine someone brave enough to cross him.

"Alice already saw it, didn't she?" I guessed. "That's why the things she says upset you. She knows I'm going to be like you... someday."

"She's wrong. She also saw you dead, but that didn't happen, either."

"You'll never catch me betting against Alice."

We stared at each other for a very long time. It was quiet except for the whirring of the machines, the beeping, the dripping, the ticking of the big clock on the wall. Finally, his expression softened.

"So where does that leave us?" I wondered.

He chuckled humorlessly. "I believe it's called an impasse." I sighed. "Ouch," I muttered.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, eyeing the button for the nurse.

"I'm fine," I lied.

"I don't believe you," he said gently.

"I'm not going back to sleep."

"You need rest. All this arguing isn't good for you."

"So give in," I hinted.

"Nice try." He reached for the button.

"No!"

He ignored me.

"Yes?" the speaker on the wall squawked.

"I think we're ready for more pain medication," he said calmly, ignoring my furious expression.

"I'll send in the nurse." The voice sounded very bored.

"I won't take it," I promised.

He looked toward the sack of fluids hanging beside my bed. "I don't think they're going to ask you to swallow anything."

My heart rate started to climb. He read the fear in my eyes, and sighed in frustration.

"Bella, you're in pain. You need to relax so you can heal. Why are you being so difficult? They're not going to put any more needles in you now."

"I'm not afraid of the needles," I mumbled. "I'm afraid to close my eyes." Then he smiled his crooked smile, and took my face between his hands. "I told you I'm not going anywhere. Don't be afraid. As long as it makes you happy, I'll be here."

I smiled back, ignoring the ache in my cheeks. "You're talking about forever, you know."

"Oh, you'll get over it — it's just a crush."

I shook my head in disbelief— it made me dizzy. "I was shocked when Renée swallowed that one. I know you know better."

"That's the beautiful thing about being human," he told me. "Things change."

My eyes narrowed. "Don't hold your breath."

He was laughing when the nurse came in, brandishing a syringe.

"Excuse me," she said brusquely to Edward.

He got up and crossed to the end of the small room, leaning against the wall. He folded his arms and waited. I kept my eyes on him, still apprehensive. He met my gaze calmly.

"Here you go, honey." The nurse smiled as she injected the medicine into my tube. "You'll feel better now."

"Thanks," I mumbled, unenthusiastic. It didn't take long. I could feel the drowsiness trickling through my bloodstream almost immediately.

"That ought to do it," she muttered as my eyelids drooped. She must have left the room, because something cold and smooth touched my face.

"Stay." The word was slurred.

"I will," he promised. His voice was beautiful, like a lullaby. "Like I said, as long as it makes you happy… as long as it's what's best for you." I tried to shake my head, but it was too heavy. "'S not the same thing," I mumbled.

He laughed. "Don't worry about that now, Bella. You can argue with me when you wake up."

I think I smiled. '"Kay."

I could feel his lips at my ear.

"I love you," he whispered.

"Me, too."

"I know," he laughed quietly.

I turned my head slightly... searching. He knew what I was after. His lips touched mine gently.

"Thanks," I sighed.

"Anytime."

I wasn't really there at all anymore. But I fought against the stupor weakly. There was just one more thing I wanted to tell him.

"Edward?" I struggled to pronounce his name clearly.

"Yes?"

"I'm betting on Alice," I mumbled.

And then the night closed over me.

# Epilogue

## AN OCCASION

Edward helped me into his car, being very careful of the wisps of silk and chiffon, the flowers he'd just pinned into my elaborately styled curls, and my bulky walking cast. He ignored the angry set of my mouth. When he had me settled, he got in the driver's seat and headed back out the long, narrow drive.

"At what point exactly are you going to tell me what's going on?" I asked grumpily. I really hated surprises. And he knew that.

"I'm shocked that you haven't figured it out yet." He threw a mocking smile in my direction, and my breath caught in my throat. Would I ever get used to his perfection?

"I did mention that you looked very nice, didn't I?" I verified.

"Yes." He grinned again. I'd never seen him dress in black before, and, with the contrast against his pale skin, his beauty was absolutely surreal. That much I couldn't deny, even if the fact that he was wearing a tuxedo made me very nervous.

Not quite as nervous as the dress. Or the shoe. Only one shoe, as my other foot was still securely encased in plaster. But the stiletto heel, held on only by satin ribbons, certainly wasn't going to help me as I tried to hobble around.

"I'm not coming over anymore if Alice is going to treat me like Guinea Pig Barbie when I do," I griped. I'd spent the better part of the day in Alice's staggeringly vast bathroom, a helpless victim as she played hairdresser and cosmetician. Whenever I fidgeted or complained, she reminded me that she didn't have any memories of being human, and asked me not to ruin her vicarious fun. Then she'd dressed me in the most ridiculous dress — deep blue, frilly and off the shoulders, with French tags I couldn't read — a dress more suitable for a runway than Forks. Nothing good could come of our formal attire, of that I was sure. Unless…

but I was afraid to put my suspicions into words, even in my own head. I was distracted then by the sound of a phone ringing. Edward pulled his cell phone from a pocket inside his jacket, looking briefly at the caller ID before answering.

"Hello, Charlie," he said warily.

"Charlie?" I frowned.

Charlie had been… difficult since my return to Forks. He had compartmentalized my bad experience into two defined reactions. Toward Carlisle he was almost worshipfully grateful. On the other hand, he was stubbornly convinced that Edward was at fault — because, if not for him, I wouldn't have left home in the first place. And Edward was far from disagreeing with him. These days I had rules that hadn't existed before: curfews… visiting hours.

Something Charlie was saying made Edward's eyes widen in disbelief, and then a grin spread across his face.

"You're kidding!" He laughed.

"What is it?" I demanded.

He ignored me. "Why don't you let me talk to him?" Edward suggested with evident pleasure. He waited for a few seconds.

"Hello, Tyler, this is Edward Cullen." His voice was very friendly, on the surface. I knew it well enough to catch the soft edge of menace. What was Tyler doing at my house? The awful truth began to dawn on me. I looked again at the inappropriate dress Alice had forced me into.

"I'm sorry if there's been some kind of miscommunication, but Bella is unavailable tonight." Edward's tone changed, and the threat in his voice was suddenly much more evident as he continued. "To be perfectly honest, she'll be unavailable every night, as far as anyone besides myself is concerned. No offense. And I'm sorry about your evening." He didn't sound sorry at all. And then he snapped the phone shut, a huge smirk on his face.

My face and neck flushed crimson with anger. I could feel the rage-induced tears starting to fill my eyes.

He looked at me in surprise. "Was that last part a bit too much? I didn't mean to offend you."

I ignored that.

"You're taking me to the prom!" I yelled.

It was embarrassingly obvious now. If I'd been paying any attention at all, I'm sure I would have noticed the date on the posters that decorated the school buildings. But I'd never dreamed he was thinking of subjecting me to this. Didn't he know me at all?

He wasn't expecting the force of my reaction, that was clear. He pressed his lips together and his eyes narrowed. "Don't be difficult, Bella." My eyes flashed to the window; we were halfway to the school already.

"Why are you doing this to me?" I demanded in horror. He gestured to his tuxedo. "Honestly, Bella, what did you think we were doing?"

I was mortified. First, because I'd missed the obvious. And also because the vague suspicions — expectations, really — that I'd been forming all day, as Alice tried to transform me into a beauty queen, were so far wide of the mark. My half-fearful hopes seemed very silly now. I'd guessed there was some kind of occasion brewing. But prom! That was the furthest thing from my mind.

The angry tears rolled over my cheeks. I remembered with dismay that I was very uncharacteristically wearing mascara. I wiped quickly under my eyes to prevent any smudges. My hand was unblackened when I pulled it away; maybe Alice had known I would need waterproof makeup.

"This is completely ridiculous. Why are you crying?" he demanded in frustration.

"Because I'm mad!"

"Bella." He turned the full force of his scorching golden eyes on me.

"What?" I muttered, distracted.

"Humor me," he insisted.

His eyes were melting all my fury. It was impossible to fight with him when he cheated like that. I gave in with poor grace.

"Fine," I pouted, unable to glare as effectively as I would have liked.

"I'll go quietly. But you'll see. I'm way overdue for more bad luck. I'll probably break my other leg. Look at this shoe! It's a death trap!" I held out my good leg as evidence.

"Hmmm." He stared at my leg longer than was necessary. "Remind me to thank Alice for that tonight."

"Alice is going to be there?" That comforted me slightly.

"With Jasper, and Emmett... and Rosalie," he admitted. The feeling of comfort disappeared. There had been no progress with Rosalie, though I was on quite good terms with her sometimes-husband. Emmett enjoyed having me around — he thought my bizarre human reactions were hilarious... or maybe it was just the fact that I fell down a lot that he found so funny. Rosalie acted as if I didn't exist. While I

shook my head to dispel the direction my thoughts had taken, I thought of something else.

"Is Charlie in on this?" I asked, suddenly suspicious.

"Of course." He grinned, and then chuckled. "Apparently Tyler wasn't, though."

I gritted my teeth. How Tyler could be so delusional, I couldn't imagine. At school, where Charlie couldn't interfere, Edward and I were inseparable — except for those rare sunny days.

We were at the school now; Rosalie's red convertible was conspicuous in the parking lot. The clouds were thin today, a few streaks of sunlight escaping through far away in the west.

He got out and walked around the car to open my door. He held out his hand.

I sat stubbornly in my seat, arms folded, feeling a secret twinge of smugness. The lot was crowded with people in formal dress: witnesses. He couldn't remove me forcibly from the car as he might have if we'd been alone.

He sighed. "When someone wants to kill you, you're brave as a lion — and then when someone mentions dancing..." He shook his head. I gulped. Dancing.

"Bella, I won't let anything hurt you — not even yourself. I won't let go of you once, I promise."

I thought about that and suddenly felt much better. He could see that in my face.

"There, now," he said gently, "it won't be so bad." He leaned down and wrapped one arm around my waist. I took his other hand and let him lift me from the car.

He kept his arm tightly around me, supporting me as I limped toward the school.

In Phoenix, they held proms in hotel ballrooms. This dance was in the gym, of course. It was probably the only room in town big enough for a dance. When we got inside, I giggled. There were actual balloon arches and twisted garlands of pastel crepe paper festooning the walls.

"This looks like a horror movie waiting to happen," I snickered.

"Well," he muttered as we slowly approached the ticket table — he was carrying most of my weight, but I still had to shuffle and wobble my feet forward — "there are more than enough vampires present." I looked at the dance floor; a wide gap had formed in the center of the floor, where two couples whirled gracefully. The other dancers pressed to the sides of the room to give them space — no one wanted to stand in contrast with such radiance. Emmett and Jasper were intimidating and flawless in classic tuxedos. Alice was striking in a black satin dress with geometric cutouts that bared large triangles of her snowy white skin. And Rosalie was… well, Rosalie. She was beyond belief. Her vivid scarlet dress was backless, tight to her calves where it flared into a wide ruffled train, with a neckline that plunged to her waist. I pitied every girl in the room, myself included.

"Do you want me to bolt the doors so you can massacre the unsuspecting townsfolk?" I whispered conspiratorially.

"And where do you fit into that scheme?" He glared.

"Oh, I'm with the vampires, of course."

He smiled reluctantly. "Anything to get out of dancing."

"Anything."

He bought our tickets, then turned me toward the dance floor. I cringed against his arm and dragged my feet.

"I've got all night," he warned.

Eventually he towed me out to where his family was twirling elegantly —

if in a style totally unsuitable to the present time and music. I watched in horror.

"Edward." My throat was so dry I could only manage a whisper. "I honestly can't dance!" I could feel the panic bubbling up inside my chest.

"Don't worry, silly," he whispered back. "I can." He put my arms around his neck and lifted me to slide his feet under mine.

And then we were whirling, too.

"I feel like I'm five years old," I laughed after a few minutes of effortless waltzing.

"You don't look five," he murmured, pulling me closer for a second, so that my feet were briefly a foot from the ground.

Alice caught my eye on a turn and smiled in encouragement — I smiled back. I was surprised to realize that I was actually enjoying myself… a little.

"Okay, this isn't half bad," I admitted.

But Edward was staring toward the doors, and his face was angry.

"What is it?" I wondered aloud. I followed his gaze, disoriented by the spinning, but finally I could see what was bothering him. Jacob Black, not in a tux, but in a long-sleeved white shirt and tie, his hair smoothed back into his usual ponytail, was crossing the floor toward us. After the first shock of recognition, I couldn't help but feel bad for Jacob. He was clearly uncomfortable — excruciatingly so. His face was apologetic as his eyes met mine.

Edward snarled very quietly.

"Behave!" I hissed.

Edward's voice was scathing. "He wants to chat with you." Jacob reached us then, the embarrassment and apology even more evident on his face.

"Hey, Bella, I was hoping you would be here." Jacob sounded like he'd been hoping the exact opposite. But his smile was just as warm as ever.

"Hi, Jacob." I smiled back. "What's up?"

"Can I cut in?" he asked tentatively, glancing at Edward for the first time. I was shocked to notice that Jacob didn't have to look up. He must have grown half a foot since the first time I'd seen him. Edward's face was composed, his expression blank. His only answer was to set me carefully on my feet, and take a step back.

"Thanks," Jacob said amiably.

Edward just nodded, looking at me intently before he turned to walk away. Jacob put his hands on my waist, and I reached up to put my hands on his shoulders.

"Wow, Jake, how tall are you now?"

He was smug. "Six-two."

We weren't really dancing — my leg made that impossible. Instead we swayed awkwardly from side to side without moving our feet. It was just as well; the recent growth spurt had left him looking gangly and uncoordinated, he was probably no better a dancer than I was.

"So, how did you end up here tonight?" I asked without true curiosity. Considering Edward's reaction, I could guess.

"Can you believe my dad paid me twenty bucks to come to your prom?" he admitted, slightly ashamed.

"Yes, I can," I muttered. "Well, I hope you're enjoying yourself, at least. Seen anything you like?" I teased, nodding toward a group of girls lined up against the wall like pastel confections.

"Yeah," he sighed. "But she's taken." He glanced down to meet my curious gaze for just a second — then we both looked away, embarrassed.

"You look really pretty, by the way," he added shyly.

"Um, thanks. So why did Billy pay you to come here?" I asked quickly, though I knew the answer.

Jacob didn't seem grateful for the subject change; he looked away, uncomfortable again. "He said it was a 'safe' place to talk to you. I swear the old man is losing his mind."

I joined in his laughter weakly.

"Anyway, he said that if I told you something, he would get me that master cylinder I need," he confessed with a sheepish grin.

"Tell me, then. I want you to get your car finished." I grinned back. At least Jacob didn't believe any of this. It made the situation a bit easier. Against the wall, Edward was watching my face, his own face expressionless. I saw a sophomore in a pink dress eyeing him with timid speculation, but he didn't seem to be aware of her.

Jacob looked away again, ashamed. "Don't get mad, okay?"

"There's no way I'll be mad at you, Jacob," I assured him. "I won't even be mad at Billy. Just say what you have to."

"Well — this is so stupid, I'm sorry, Bella — he wants you to break up with your boyfriend. He asked me to tell you 'please.'" He shook his head in disgust.

"He's still superstitious, eh?"

"Yeah. He was… kind of over the top when you got hurt down in Phoenix. He didn't believe…"Jacob trailed off self-consciously.

My eyes narrowed. "I fell."

"I know that," Jacob said quickly.

"He thinks Edward had something to do with me getting hurt." It wasn't a question, and despite my promise, I was angry.

Jacob wouldn't meet my eyes. We weren't even bothering to sway to the music, though his hands were still on my waist, and mine around his neck.

"Look, Jacob, I know Billy probably won't believe this, but just so you know" — he looked at me now, responding to the new earnestness in my voice — "Edward really did save my life. If it weren't for Edward and his father, I'd be dead."

"I know," he claimed, but he sounded like my sincere words had affected him some. Maybe he'd be able to convince Billy of this much, at least.

"Hey, I'm sorry you had to come do this, Jacob," I apologized. "At any rate, you get your parts, right?"

"Yeah," he muttered. He was still looking awkward… upset.

"There's more?" I asked in disbelief.

"Forget it," he mumbled, "I'll get a job and save the money myself." I glared at him until he met my gaze. "Just spit it out, Jacob."

"It's so bad."

"I don't care. Tell me," I insisted.

"Okay… but, geez, this sounds bad." He shook his head. "He said to tell you, no, to warn you, that — and this is his plural, not mine" — he lifted one hand from my waist and made little quotations marks in the air

— '"We'll be watching.'" He watched warily for my reaction. It sounded like something from a mafia movie. I laughed out loud.

"Sorry you had to do this, Jake," I snickered.

"I don't mind that much." He grinned in relief. His eyes were appraising as they raked quickly over my dress. "So, should I tell him you said to butt the hell out?" he asked hopefully.

"No," I sighed. "Tell him I said thanks. I know he means well." The song ended, and I dropped my arms.

His hands hesitated at my waist, and he glanced at my bum leg. "Do you want to dance again? Or can I help you get somewhere?" Edward answered for me. "That's all right, Jacob. I'll take it from here." Jacob flinched, and stared wide-eyed at Edward, who stood just beside us.

"Hey, I didn't see you there," he mumbled. "I guess I'll see you around, Bella." He stepped back, waving halfheartedly.

I smiled. "Yeah, I'll see you later."

"Sorry," he said again before he turned for the door. Edward's arms wound around me as the next song started. It was a little up-tempo for slow dancing, but that didn't seem to concern him. I leaned my head against his chest, content.

"Feeling better?" I teased.

"Not really," he said tersely.

"Don't be mad at Billy," I sighed. "He just worries about me for Charlie's sake. It's nothing personal."

"I'm not mad at Billy," he corrected in a clipped voice. "But his son is irritating me."

I pulled back to look at him. His face was very serious.

"Why?"

"First of all, he made me break my promise."

I stared at him in confusion.

He half-smiled. "I promised I wouldn't let go of you tonight," he explained.

"Oh. Well, I forgive you."

"Thanks. But there's something else." Edward frowned. I waited patiently.

"He called you pretty," he finally continued, his frown deepening.

"That's practically an insult, the way you look right now. You're much more than beautiful."

I laughed. "You might be a little biased."

"I don't think that's it. Besides, I have excellent eyesight." We were twirling again, my feet on his as he held me close.

"So are you going to explain the reason for all of this?" I wondered. He looked down at me, confused, and I glared meaningfully at the crepe paper.

He considered for a moment, and then changed direction, spinning me through the crowd to the back door of the gym. I caught a glimpse of Jessica and Mike dancing, staring at me curiously. Jessica waved, and I smiled back quickly. Angela was there, too, looking blissfully happy in the arms of little Ben Cheney; she didn't look up from his eyes, a head lower than hers. Lee and Samantha, Lauren, glaring toward us, with Conner; I could name every face that spiraled past me. And then we were outdoors, in the cool, dim light of a fading sunset.

As soon as we were alone, he swung me up into his arms, and carried me across the dark grounds till he reached the bench beneath the shadow of the madrone trees. He sat there, keeping me cradled against his chest. The moon was already up, visible through the gauzy clouds, and his face glowed pale in the white light. His mouth was hard, his eyes troubled.

"The point?" I prompted softly.

He ignored me, staring up at the moon.

"Twilight, again," he murmured. "Another ending. No matter how perfect the day is, it always has to end."

"Some things don't have to end," I muttered through my teeth, instantly tense.

He sighed.

"I brought you to the prom," he said slowly, finally answering my question, "because I don't want you to miss anything. I don't want my presence to take anything away from you, if I can help it. I want you to be human. I want your life to continue as it would have if I'd died in nineteen-eighteen like I should have."

I shuddered at his words, and then shook my head angrily. "In what strange parallel dimension would I ever have gone to prom of my own free will? If you weren't a thousand times stronger than me, I would never have let you get away with this."

He smiled briefly, but it didn't touch his eyes. "It wasn't so bad, you said so yourself."

"That's because I was with you."

We were quiet for a minute; he stared at the moon and I stared at him. I wished there was some way to explain how very uninterested I was in a normal human life.

"Will you tell me something?" he asked, glancing down at me with a slight smile.

"Don't I always?"

"Just promise you'll tell me," he insisted, grinning. I knew I was going to regret this almost instantly. "Fine."

"You seemed honestly surprised when you figured out that I was taking you here," he began.

"I was," I interjected.

"Exactly," he agreed. "But you must have had some other theory… I'm curious — what did you think I was dressing you up for?" Yes, instant regret. I pursed my lips, hesitating. "I don't want to tell you."

"You promised," he objected.

"I know."

"What's the problem?"

I knew he thought it was mere embarrassment holding me back. "I think it will make you mad — or sad."

His brows pulled together over his eyes as he thought that through. "I still want to know. Please?"

I sighed. He waited.

"Well… I assumed it was some kind of… occasion. But I didn't think it would be some trite human thing… prom!" I scoffed.

"Human?" he asked flatly. He'd picked up on the key word. I looked down at my dress, fidgeting with a stray piece of chiffon. He waited in silence.

"Okay," I confessed in a rush. "So I was hoping that you might have changed your mind… that you were going to change me, after all." A dozen emotions played across his face. Some I recognized: anger… pain…

and then he seemed to collect himself and his expression became amused.

"You thought that would be a black tie occasion, did you?" he teased, touching the lapel of his tuxedo jacket.

I scowled to hide my embarrassment. "I don't know how these things work. To me, at least, it seems more rational than prom does." He was still grinning. "It's not funny," I said.

"No, you're right, it's not," he agreed, his smile fading. "I'd rather treat it like a joke, though, than believe you're serious."

"But I am serious."

He sighed deeply. "I know. And you're really that willing?" The pain was back in his eyes. I bit my lip and nodded.

"So ready for this to be the end," he murmured, almost to himself, "for this to be the twilight of your life, though your life has barely started. You're ready to give up everything."

"It's not the end, it's the beginning," I disagreed under my breath.

"I'm not worth it," he said sadly.

"Do you remember when you told me that I didn't see myself very clearly?" I asked, raising my eyebrows. "You obviously have the same blindness."

"I know what I am."

I sighed.

But his mercurial mood shifted on me. He pursed his lips, and his eyes were probing. He examined my face for a long moment.

"You're ready now, then?" he asked.

"Um." I gulped. "Yes?"

He smiled, and inclined his head slowly until his cold lips brushed against the skin just under the corner of my jaw.

"Right now?" he whispered, his breath blowing cool on my neck. I shivered involuntarily.

"Yes," I whispered, so my voice wouldn't have a chance to break. If he thought I was bluffing, he was going to be disappointed. I'd already made this decision, and I was sure. It didn't matter that my body was rigid as a plank, my hands balled into fists, my breathing erratic…

He chuckled darkly, and leaned away. His face did look disappointed.

"You can't really believe that I would give in so easily," he said with a sour edge to his mocking tone.

"A girl can dream."

His eyebrows rose. "Is that what you dream about? Being a monster?"

"Not exactly," I said, frowning at his word choice. Monster, indeed.

"Mostly I dream about being with you forever."

His expression changed, softened and saddened by the subtle ache in my voice.

"Bella." His fingers lightly traced the shape of my lips. "I will stay with you — isn't that enough?"

I smiled under his fingertips. "Enough for now." He frowned at my tenacity. No one was going to surrender tonight. He exhaled, and the sound was practically a growl.

I touched his face. "Look," I said. "I love you more than everything else in the world combined. Isn't that enough?"

"Yes, it is enough," he answered, smiling. "Enough for forever." And he leaned down to press his cold lips once more to my throat.


new moon
STEPHENIE MEYER
AUTHOR OF THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER TWILIGHT

# Preface

I felt like I was trapped in one of those terrifying nightmares, the one where you have to run, run till your lungs burst, but you can't make your body move fast enough. My legs seemed to move slower and slower as I fought my way through the callous crowd, but the hands on the huge clock tower didn't slow. With relentless, uncaring force, they turned inexorably toward the end—the end of everything.

But this was no dream, and, unlike the nightmare, I wasn't running for my life; I was racing to save something infinitely more precious. My own life meant little to me today.

Alice had said there was a good chance we would both die here. Perhaps the outcome would be different if she weren't trapped by the brilliant sunlight; only I was free to run across this bright, crowded square.

And I couldn't run fast enough.

So it didn't matter to me that we were surrounded by our extraordinarily dangerous enemies. As the clock began to toll out the hour, vibrating under the soles of my sluggish feet, I knew I was too late—and I was glad something bloodthirsty waited in the wings. For in failing at this, I forfeited any desire to live.

The clock tolled again, and the sun beat down from the exact center point of the sky.

# Chapter 1

## PARTY

I was ninety-nine point nine percent sure I was dreaming.

The reasons I was so certain were that, first, I was standing in a bright shaft of sunlight—the kind of blinding clear sun that never shone on my drizzly new hometown in Forks, Washington—and second, I was looking at my Grandma Marie. Gran had been dead for six years now, so that was solid evidence toward the dream theory.

Gran hadn't changed much; her face looked just the same as I remembered it. The skin was soft and withered, bent into a thousand tiny creases that clung gently to the bone underneath. Like a dried apricot, but with a puff of thick white hair standing out in a cloud around it.

Our mouths—hers a wizened pucker—spread into the same surprised half-smile at just the same time. Apparently, she hadn't been expecting to see me, either.

I was about to ask her a question; I had so many—What was she doing here in my dream? What had she been up to in the past six years? Was Pop okay, and had they found each other, wherever they were?—but she opened her mouth when I did, so I stopped to let her go first. She paused, too, and then we both smiled at the little awkwardness.

"Bella?"

It wasn't Gran who called my name, and we both turned to see the addition to our small reunion. I didn't have to look to know who it was; this was a voice I would know anywhere—know, and respond to, whether I was awake or asleep…or even dead, I'd bet. The voice I'd walk through fire for—or, less dramatically, slosh every day through the cold and endless rain for.

Edward.

Even though I was always thrilled to see him—conscious or otherwise—and even though I was almost positive that I was dreaming, I panicked as Edward walked toward us through the glaring sunlight.

I panicked because Gran didn't know that I was in love with a vampire—nobody knew that—so how was I supposed to explain the fact that the brilliant sunbeams were shattering off his skin into a thousand rainbow shards like he was made of crystal or diamond?

Well, Gran, you might have noticed that my boyfriend glitters. It's just something he does in the sun. Don't worry about it….

What was he doing? The whole reason he lived in Forks, the rainiest place in the world, was so that he could be outside in the daytime without exposing his family's secret. Yet here he was, strolling gracefully toward me—with the most beautiful smile on his angel's face—as if I were the only one here.

In that second, I wished that I was not the one exception to his mysterious talent; I usually felt grateful that I was the only person whose thoughts he couldn't hear just as clearly as if they were spoken

aloud. But now I wished he could hear me, too, so that he could hear the warning I was screaming in my head.

I shot a panicked glance back at Gran, and saw that it was too late. She was just turning to stare back at me, her eyes as alarmed as mine.

Edward—still smiling so beautifully that my heart felt like it was going to swell up and burst through my chest—put his arm around my shoulder and turned to face my grandmother.

Gran's expression surprised me. Instead of looking horrified, she was staring at me sheepishly, as if waiting for a scolding. And she was standing in such a strange position—one arm held awkwardly away from her body, stretched out and then curled around the air. Like she had her arm around someone I couldn't see, someone invisible…

Only then, as I looked at the bigger picture, did I notice the huge gilt frame that enclosed my grandmother's form. Uncomprehending, I raised the hand that wasn't wrapped around Edward's waist and reached out to touch her. She mimicked the movement exactly, mirrored it. But where our fingers should have met, there was nothing but cold glass…

With a dizzying jolt, my dream abruptly became a nightmare.

There was no Gran.

That was me. Me in a mirror. Me—ancient, creased, and withered.

Edward stood beside me, casting no reflection, excruciatingly lovely and forever seventeen.

He pressed his icy, perfect lips against my wasted cheek.

“Happy birthday,” he whispered.

I woke with a start—my eyelids popping open wide—and gasped. Dull gray light, the familiar light of an overcast morning, took the place of the blinding sun in my dream.

Just a dream, I told myself. It was only a dream. I took a deep breath, and then jumped again when my alarm went off. The little calendar in the corner of the clock’s display informed me that today was September thirteenth.

Only a dream, but prophetic enough in one way, at least. Today was my birthday. I was officially eighteen years old.

I’d been dreading this day for months.

All through the perfect summer—the happiest summer I had ever had, the happiest summer anyone anywhere had ever had, and the rainiest summer in the history of the Olympic Peninsula—this bleak date had lurked in ambush, waiting to spring.

And now that it had hit, it was even worse than I’d feared it would be. I could feel it—I was older. Every day I got older, but this was different, worse, quantifiable. I was eighteen.

And Edward never would be.

When I went to brush my teeth, I was almost surprised that the face in the mirror hadn’t changed. I stared at myself, looking for some sign of impending wrinkles in my ivory skin. The only creases were the

ones on my forehead, though, and I knew that if I could manage to relax, they would disappear. I couldn't. My eyebrows stayed lodged in a worried line over my anxious brown eyes.

It was just a dream, I reminded myself again. Just a dream…but also my worst nightmare.

I skipped breakfast, in a hurry to get out of the house as quickly as possible. I wasn't entirely able to avoid my dad, and so I had to spend a few minutes acting cheerful. I honestly tried to be excited about the gifts I'd asked him not to get me, but every time I had to smile, it felt like I might start crying.

I struggled to get a grip on myself as I drove to school. The vision of Gran—I would not think of it as me—was hard to get out of my head. I couldn't feel anything but despair until I pulled into the familiar parking lot behind Forks High School and spotted Edward leaning motionlessly against his polished silver Volvo, like a marble tribute to some forgotten pagan god of beauty. The dream had not done him justice. And he was waiting there for me, just the same as every other day.

Despair momentarily vanished; wonder took its place. Even after half a year with him, I still couldn't believe that I deserved this degree of good fortune.

His sister Alice was standing by his side, waiting for me, too.

Of course Edward and Alice weren't really related (in Forks the story was that all the Cullen siblings were adopted by Dr. Carlisle Cullen and his wife, Esme, both plainly too young to have teenage children), but their skin was precisely the same pale shade, their eyes had the same strange golden tint, with the same

deep, bruise-like shadows beneath them. Her face, like his, was also startlingly beautiful. To someone in the know—someone like me—these similarities marked them for what they were.

The sight of Alice waiting there—her tawny eyes brilliant with excitement, and a small silver-wrapped square in her hands—made me frown. I'd told Alice I didn't want anything, anything, not gifts or even attention, for my birthday. Obviously, my wishes were being ignored.

I slammed the door of my '53 Chevy truck—a shower of rust specks fluttered down to the wet blacktop—and walked slowly toward where they waited. Alice skipped forward to meet me, her pixie face glowing under her spiky black hair.

"Happy birthday, Bella!"

"Shh!" I hissed, glancing around the lot to make sure no one had heard her. The last thing I wanted was some kind of celebration of the black event.

She ignored me. "Do you want to open your present now or later?" she asked eagerly as we made our way to where Edward still waited.

"No presents," I protested in a mumble.

She finally seemed to process my mood. "Okay…later, then. Did you like the scrapbook your mom sent you? And the camera from Charlie?"

I sighed. Of course she would know what my birthday presents were. Edward wasn't the only member of his family with unusual skills. Alice would have "seen" what my parents were planning as soon as they'd decided that themselves.

"Yeah. They're great."

"I think it's a nice idea. You're only a senior once. Might as well document the experience."

"How many times have you been a senior?"

"That's different."

We reached Edward then, and he held out his hand for mine. I took it eagerly, forgetting, for a moment, my glum mood. His skin was, as always, smooth, hard, and very cold. He gave my fingers a gentle squeeze. I looked into his liquid topaz eyes, and my heart gave a not-quite-so-gentle squeeze of its own. Hearing the stutter in my heartbeats, he smiled again.

He lifted his free hand and traced one cool fingertip around the outside of my lips as he spoke. "So, as discussed, I am not allowed to wish you a happy birthday, is that correct?"

"Yes. That is correct." I could never quite mimic the flow of his perfect, formal articulation. It was something that could only be picked up in an earlier century.

"Just checking." He ran his hand through his tousled bronze hair. "You might have changed your mind. Most people seem to enjoy things like birthdays and gifts."

Alice laughed, and the sound was all silver, a wind chime. "Of course you'll enjoy it. Everyone is supposed to be nice to you today and give you your way, Bella. What's the worst that could happen?" She meant it as a rhetorical question.

"Getting older," I answered anyway, and my voice was not as steady as I wanted it to be.

Beside me, Edward's smile tightened into a hard line.

"Eighteen isn't very old," Alice said. "Don't women usually wait till they're twenty-nine to get upset over birthdays?"

"It's older than Edward," I mumbled.

He sighed.

"Technically," she said, keeping her tone light. "Just by one little year, though."

And I supposed…if I could be sure of the future I wanted, sure that I would get to spend forever with Edward, and Alice and the rest of the Cullens (preferably not as a wrinkled little old lady)…then a year or two one direction or the other wouldn't matter to me so much. But Edward was dead set against any future that changed me. Any future that made me like him—that made me immortal, too.

An impasse, he called it.

I couldn't really see Edward's point, to be honest. What was so great about mortality? Being a vampire didn't look like such a terrible thing—not the way the Cullens did it, anyway.

"What time will you be at the house?" Alice continued, changing the subject. From her expression, she was up to exactly the kind of thing I'd been hoping to avoid.

"I didn't know I had plans to be there."

"Oh, be fair, Bella!" she complained. "You aren't going to ruin all our fun like that, are you?"

"I thought my birthday was about what I want."

"I'll get her from Charlie's right after school," Edward told her, ignoring me altogether.

"I have to work," I protested.

"You don't, actually," Alice told me smugly. "I already spoke to Mrs. Newton about it. She's trading your shifts. She said to tell you 'Happy Birthday.'"

"I—I still can't come over," I stammered, scrambling for an excuse. "I, well, I haven't watched Romeo and Juliet yet for English."

Alice snorted. "You have Romeo and Juliet memorized."

"But Mr. Berty said we needed to see it performed to fully appreciate it—that's how Shakespeare intended it to be presented."

Edward rolled his eyes.

"You've already seen the movie," Alice accused.

"But not the nineteen-sixties version. Mr. Berty said it was the best."

Finally, Alice lost the smug smile and glared at me. "This can be easy, or this can be hard, Bella, but one way or the other—"

Edward interrupted her threat. "Relax, Alice. If Bella wants to watch a movie, then she can. It's her birthday."

"So there," I added.

"I'll bring her over around seven," he continued. "That will give you more time to set up."

Alice's laughter chimed again. "Sounds good. See you tonight, Bella! It'll be fun, you'll see." She grinned—the wide smile exposed all her perfect, glistening teeth—then pecked me on the cheek and danced off toward her first class before I could respond.

"Edward, please—" I started to beg, but he pressed one cool finger to my lips.

"Let's discuss it later. We're going to be late for class."

No one bothered to stare at us as we took our usual seats in the back of the classroom (we had almost every class together now—it was amazing the favors Edward could get the female administrators to do for him). Edward and I had been together too long now to be an object of gossip anymore. Even Mike Newton didn't bother to give me the glum stare that used to make me feel a little guilty. He smiled now instead, and I was glad he seemed to have accepted that we could only be friends. Mike had changed over the summer—his face had lost some of the roundness, making his cheekbones more prominent, and he was wearing his pale blond hair a new way; instead of bristly, it was longer and gelled into a carefully casual disarray. It was easy to see where his inspiration came from—but Edward's look wasn't something that could be achieved through imitation.

As the day progressed, I considered ways to get out of whatever was going down at the Cullen house tonight. It would be bad enough to have to celebrate when I was in the mood to mourn. But, worse than that, this was sure to involve attention and gifts.

Attention is never a good thing, as any other accident-prone klutz would agree. No one wants a spotlight when they're likely to fall on their face.

And I'd very pointedly asked—well, ordered really—that no one give me any presents this year. It looked like Charlie and Reneé weren't the only ones who had decided to overlook that.

I'd never had much money, and that had never bothered me. Reneé had raised me on a kindergarten teacher's salary. Charlie wasn't getting rich at his job, either—he was the police chief here in the tiny town of Forks. My only personal income came from the three days a week I worked at the local sporting goods store. In a town this small, I was lucky to have a job. Every penny I made went into my microscopic college fund. (College was Plan B. I was still hoping for Plan A, but Edward was just so stubborn about leaving me human….)

Edward had a lot of money—I didn't even want to think about how much. Money meant next to nothing to Edward or the rest of the Cullens. It was just something that accumulated when you had unlimited time on your hands and a sister who had an uncanny ability to predict trends in the stock market. Edward didn't seem to understand why I objected to him spending money on me—why it made me uncomfortable if he took me to an expensive restaurant in Seattle, why he wasn't allowed to buy me a car that could reach speeds over fifty-five miles an hour, or why I wouldn't let him pay my college tuition (he was ridiculously enthusiastic about Plan B). Edward thought I was being unnecessarily difficult.

But how could I let him give me things when I had nothing to reciprocate with? He, for some

unfathomable reason, wanted to be with me. Anything he gave me on top of that just threw us more out of balance.

As the day went on, neither Edward nor Alice brought my birthday up again, and I began to relax a little.

We sat at our usual table for lunch.

A strange kind of truce existed at that table. The three of us—Edward, Alice, and I—sat on the extreme southern end of the table. Now that the "older" and somewhat scarier (in Emmett's case, certainly) Cullen siblings had graduated, Alice and Edward did not seem quite so intimidating, and we did not sit here alone. My other friends, Mike and Jessica (who were in the awkward post-breakup friendship phase), Angela and Ben (whose relationship had survived the summer), Eric, Conner, Tyler, and Lauren (though that last one didn't really count in the friend category) all sat at the same table, on the other side of an invisible line. That line dissolved on sunny days when Edward and Alice always skipped school, and then the conversation would swell out effortlessly to include me.

Edward and Alice didn't find this minor ostracism odd or hurtful the way I would have. They barely noticed it. People always felt strangely ill at ease with the Cullens, almost afraid for some reason they couldn't explain to themselves. I was a rare exception to that rule. Sometimes it bothered Edward how very comfortable I was with being close to him. He thought he was hazardous to my health—an opinion I rejected vehemently whenever he voiced it.

The afternoon passed quickly. School ended, and Edward walked me to my truck as he usually did. But this time, he held the passenger door open for me.

Alice must have been taking his car home so that he could keep me from making a run for it.

I folded my arms and made no move to get out of the rain. “It’s my birthday, don’t I get to drive?”

“I’m pretending it’s not your birthday, just as you wished.”

“If it’s not my birthday, then I don’t have to go to your house tonight . . .”

“All right.” He shut the passenger door and walked past me to open the driver’s side. “Happy birthday.”

“Shh,” I shushed him halfheartedly. I climbed in the opened door, wishing he’d taken the other offer.

Edward played with the radio while I drove, shaking his head in disapproval.

“Your radio has horrible reception.”

I frowned. I didn’t like it when he picked on my truck. The truck was great—it had personality.

“You want a nice stereo? Drive your own car.” I was so nervous about Alice’s plans, on top of my already gloomy mood, that the words came out sharper than I’d meant them. I was hardly ever bad-tempered with Edward, and my tone made him press his lips together to keep from smiling.

When I parked in front of Charlie’s house, he reached over to take my face in his hands. He handled me very carefully, pressing just the tips of his fingers softly against my temples, my cheekbones, my jawline. Like I was especially breakable. Which was exactly the case—compared with him, at least.

"You should be in a good mood, today of all days," he whispered. His sweet breath fanned across my face.

"And if I don't want to be in a good mood?" I asked, my breathing uneven.

His golden eyes smoldered. "Too bad."

My head was already spinning by the time he leaned closer and pressed his icy lips against mine. As he intended, no doubt, I forgot all about my worries, and concentrated on remembering how to inhale and exhale.

His mouth lingered on mine, cold and smooth and gentle, until I wrapped my arms around his neck and threw myself into the kiss with a little too much enthusiasm. I could feel his lips curve upward as he let go of my face and reached back to unlock my grip on him.

Edward had drawn many careful lines for our physical relationship, with the intent being to keep me alive. Though I respected the need for maintaining a safe distance between my skin and his razor-sharp, venom-coated teeth, I tended to forget about trivial things like that when he was kissing me.

"Be good, please," he breathed against my cheek. He pressed his lips gently to mine one more time and then pulled away, folding my arms across my stomach.

My pulse was thudding in my ears. I put one hand over my heart. It drummed hyperactively under my palm.

"Do you think I'll ever get better at this?" I wondered, mostly to myself. "That my heart might someday stop

trying to jump out of my chest whenever you touch me?”

“I really hope not,” he said, a bit smug.

I rolled my eyes. “Let’s go watch the Capulets and Montagues hack each other up, all right?”

“Your wish, my command.”

Edward sprawled across the couch while I started the movie, fast-forwarding through the opening credits. When I perched on the edge of the sofa in front of him, he wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me against his chest. It wasn’t exactly as comfortable as a sofa cushion would be, what with his chest being hard and cold—and perfect—as an ice sculpture, but it was definitely preferable. He pulled the old afghan off the back of the couch and draped it over me so I wouldn’t freeze beside his body.

“You know, I’ve never had much patience with Romeo,” he commented as the movie started.

“What’s wrong with Romeo?” I asked, a little offended. Romeo was one of my favorite fictional characters. Until I’d met Edward, I’d sort of had a thing for him.

“Well, first of all, he’s in love with this Rosaline—don’t you think it makes him seem a little fickle? And then, a few minutes after their wedding, he kills Juliet’s cousin. That’s not very brilliant. Mistake after mistake. Could he have destroyed his own happiness any more thoroughly?”

I sighed. “Do you want me to watch this alone?”

“No, I’ll mostly be watching you, anyway.” His fingers traced patterns across the skin of my arm, raising goose bumps. “Will you cry?”

“Probably,” I admitted, “if I’m paying attention.”

“I won’t distract you then.” But I felt his lips on my hair, and it was very distracting.

The movie eventually captured my interest, thanks in large part to Edward whispering Romeo’s lines in my ear—his irresistible, velvet voice made the actor’s voice sound weak and coarse by comparison. And I did cry, to his amusement, when Juliet woke and found her new husband dead.

“I’ll admit, I do sort of envy him here,” Edward said, drying the tears with a lock of my hair.

“She’s very pretty.”

He made a disgusted sound. “I don’t envy him the girl—just the ease of the suicide,” he clarified in a teasing tone. “You humans have it so easy! All you have to do is throw down one tiny vial of plant extracts….”

“What?” I gasped.

“It’s something I had to think about once, and I knew from Carlisle’s experience that it wouldn’t be simple. I’m not even sure how many ways Carlisle tried to kill himself in the beginning…after he realized what he’d become….” His voice, which had grown serious, turned light again. “And he’s clearly still in excellent health.”

I twisted around so that I could read his face. “What are you talking about?” I demanded. “What do you mean, this something you had to think about once?”

“Last spring, when you were…nearly killed . . .” He paused to take a deep breath, struggling to return to his teasing tone. “Of course I was trying to focus on finding you alive, but part of my mind was making contingency plans. Like I said, it’s not as easy for me as it is for a human.”

For one second, the memory of my last trip to Phoenix washed through my head and made me feel dizzy. I could see it all so clearly—the blinding sun, the heat waves coming off the concrete as I ran with desperate haste to find the sadistic vampire who wanted to torture me to death. James, waiting in the mirrored room with my mother as his hostage—or so I’d thought. I hadn’t known it was all a ruse. Just as James hadn’t known that Edward was racing to save me; Edward made it in time, but it had been a close one. Unthinkingly, my fingers traced the crescent-shaped scar on my hand that was always just a few degrees cooler than the rest of my skin.

I shook my head—as if I could shake away the bad memories—and tried to grasp what Edward meant. My stomach plunged uncomfortably. “Contingency plans?” I re peated.

“Well, I wasn’t going to live without you.” He rolled his eyes as if that fact were childishly obvious. “But I wasn’t sure how to do it—I knew Emmett and Jasper would never help…so I was thinking maybe I would go to Italy and do something to provoke the Volturi.”

I didn’t want to believe he was serious, but his golden eyes were brooding, focused on something far away in

the distance as he contemplated ways to end his own life. Abruptly, I was furious.

“What is a Volturi?” I demanded.

“The Volturi are a family,” he explained, his eyes still remote. “A very old, very powerful family of our kind. They are the closest thing our world has to a royal family, I suppose. Carlisle lived with them briefly in his early years, in Italy, before he settled in America—do you remember the story?”

“Of course I remember.”

I would never forget the first time I’d gone to his home, the huge white mansion buried deep in the forest beside the river, or the room where Carlisle—Edward’s father in so many real ways—kept a wall of paintings that illustrated his personal history. The most vivid, most wildly colorful canvas there, the largest, was from Carlisle’s time in Italy. Of course I remembered the calm quartet of men, each with the exquisite face of a seraph, painted into the highest balcony overlooking the swirling mayhem of color. Though the painting was centuries old, Carlisle—the blond angel—remained unchanged. And I remembered the three others, Carlisle’s early acquaintances. Edward had never used the name Volturi for the beautiful trio, two black-haired, one snow white. He’d called them Aro, Caius, and Marcus, nighttime patrons of the arts....

“Anyway, you don’t irritate the Volturi,” Edward went on, interrupting my reverie. “Not unless you want to die—or whatever it is we do.” His voice was so calm, it made him sound almost bored by the prospect.

My anger turned to horror. I took his marble face between my hands and held it very tightly.

"You must never, never, never think of anything like that again!" I said. "No matter what might ever happen to me, you are not allowed to hurt yourself!"

"I'll never put you in danger again, so it's a moot point."

"Put me in danger! I thought we'd established that all the bad luck is my fault?" I was getting angrier. "How dare you even think like that?" The idea of Edward ceasing to exist, even if I were dead, was impossibly painful.

"What would you do, if the situation were reversed?" he asked.

"That's not the same thing."

He didn't seem to understand the difference. He chuckled.

"What if something did happen to you?" I blanched at the thought. "Would you want me to go off myself?"

A trace of pain touched his perfect features.

"I guess I see your point…a little," he admitted. "But what would I do without you?"

"Whatever you were doing before I came along and complicated your existence."

He sighed. "You make that sound so easy."

"It should be. I'm not really that interesting."

He was about to argue, but then he let it go. "Moot point," he reminded me. Abruptly, he pulled himself

up into a more formal posture, shifting me to the side so that we were no longer touching.

“Charlie?” I guessed.

Edward smiled. After a moment, I heard the sound of the police cruiser pulling into the driveway. I reached out and took his hand firmly. My dad could deal with that much.

Charlie came in with a pizza box in his hands.

“Hey, kids.” He grinned at me. “I thought you’d like a break from cooking and washing dishes for your birthday. Hungry?”

“Sure. Thanks, Dad.”

Charlie didn’t comment on Edward’s apparent lack of appetite. He was used to Edward passing on dinner.

“Do you mind if I borrow Bella for the evening?” Edward asked when Charlie and I were done.

I looked at Charlie hopefully. Maybe he had some concept of birthdays as stay-at-home, family affairs—this was my first birthday with him, the first birthday since my mom, Reneé, had remarried and gone to live in Florida, so I didn’t know what he would expect.

“That’s fine—the Mariners are playing the Sox tonight,” Charlie explained, and my hope disappeared. “So I won’t be any kind of company….Here.” He scooped up the camera he’d gotten me on Reneé’s suggestion (because I would need pictures to fill up my scrapbook), and threw it to me.

He ought to know better than that—I'd always been coordinationally challenged. The camera glanced off the tip of my finger, and tumbled toward the floor. Edward snagged it before it could crash onto the linoleum.

“Nice save,” Charlie noted. “If they're doing something fun at the Cullens' tonight, Bella, you should take some pictures. You know how your mother gets—she'll be wanting to see the pictures faster than you can take them.”

“Good idea, Charlie,” Edward said, handing me the camera.

I turned the camera on Edward, and snapped the first picture. “It works.”

“That's good. Hey, say hi to Alice for me. She hasn't been over in a while.” Charlie's mouth pulled down at one corner.

“It's been three days, Dad,” I reminded him. Charlie was crazy about Alice. He'd become attached last spring when she'd helped me through my awkward convalescence; Charlie would be forever grateful to her for saving him from the horror of an almost-adult daughter who needed help showering. “I'll tell her.”

“Okay. You kids have fun tonight.” It was clearly a dismissal. Charlie was already edging toward the living room and the TV.

Edward smiled, triumphant, and took my hand to pull me from the kitchen.

When we got to the truck, he opened the passenger door for me again, and this time I didn't argue. I still

had a hard time finding the obscure turnoff to his house in the dark.

Edward drove north through Forks, visibly chafing at the speed limit enforced by my prehistoric Chevy. The engine groaned even louder than usual as he pushed it over fifty.

"Take it easy," I warned him.

"You know what you would love? A nice little Audi coupe. Very quiet, lots of power . . ."

"There's nothing wrong with my truck. And speaking of expensive nonessentials, if you know what's good for you, you didn't spend any money on birthday presents."

"Not a dime," he said virtuously.

"Good."

"Can you do me a favor?"

"That depends on what it is."

He sighed, his lovely face serious. "Bella, the last real birthday any of us had was Emmett in 1935. Cut us a little slack, and don't be too difficult tonight. They're all very excited."

It always startled me a little when he brought up things like that. "Fine, I'll behave."

"I probably should warn you . . ."

"Please do."

"When I say they're all excited…I do mean all of them."

"Everyone?" I choked. "I thought Emmett and Rosalie were in Africa." The rest of Forks was under the impression that the older Cullens had gone off to college this year, to Dartmouth, but I knew better.

"Emmett wanted to be here."

"But…Rosalie?"

"I know, Bella. Don't worry, she'll be on her best behavior."

I didn't answer. Like I could just not worry, that easy. Unlike Alice, Edward's other "adopted" sister, the golden blond and exquisite Rosalie, didn't like me much. Actually, the feeling was a little bit stronger than just dislike. As far as Rosalie was concerned, I was an unwelcome intruder into her family's secret life.

I felt horribly guilty about the present situation, guessing that Rosalie and Emmett's prolonged absence was my fault, even as I furtively enjoyed not having to see her. Emmett, Edward's playful bear of a brother, I did miss. He was in many ways just like the big brother I'd always wanted…only much, much more terrifying.

Edward decided to change the subject. "So, if you won't let me get you the Audi, isn't there anything that you'd like for your birthday?"

The words came out in a whisper. "You know what I want."

A deep frown carved creases into his marble forehead. He obviously wished he'd stuck to the subject of Rosalie.

It felt like we'd had this argument a lot today.

"Not tonight, Bella. Please."

"Well, maybe Alice will give me what I want."

Edward growled—a deep, menacing sound. "This isn't going to be your last birthday, Bella," he vowed.

"That's not fair!"

I thought I heard his teeth clench together.

We were pulling up to the house now. Bright light shined from every window on the first two floors. A long line of glowing Japanese lanterns hung from the porch eaves, reflecting a soft radiance on the huge cedars that surrounded the house. Big bowls of flowers—pink roses—lined the wide stairs up to the front doors.

I moaned.

Edward took a few deep breaths to calm himself. "This is a party," he reminded me. "Try to be a good sport."

"Sure," I muttered.

He came around to get my door, and offered me his hand.

"I have a question."

He waited warily.

"If I develop this film," I said, toying with the camera in my hands, "will you show up in the picture?"

Edward started laughing. He helped me out of the car, pulled me up the stairs, and was still laughing as he opened the door for me.

They were all waiting in the huge white living room; when I walked through the door, they greeted me with a loud chorus of "Happy birthday, Bella!" while I blushed and looked down. Alice, I assumed, had covered every flat surface with pink candles and dozens of crystal bowls filled with hundreds of roses. There was a table with a white cloth draped over it next to Edward's grand piano, holding a pink birthday cake, more roses, a stack of glass plates, and a small pile of silver-wrapped presents.

It was a hundred times worse than I'd imagined.

Edward, sensing my distress, wrapped an encouraging arm around my waist and kissed the top of my head.

Edward's parents, Carlisle and Esme—impossibly youthful and lovely as ever—were the closest to the door. Esme hugged me carefully, her soft, caramel-colored hair brushing against my cheek as she kissed my forehead, and then Carlisle put his arm around my shoulders.

"Sorry about this, Bella," he stage-whispered. "We couldn't rein Alice in."

Rosalie and Emmett stood behind them. Rosalie didn't smile, but at least she didn't glare. Emmett's face was stretched into a huge grin. It had been months since I'd seen them; I'd forgotten how

gloriously beautiful Rosalie was—it almost hurt to look at her. And had Emmett always been so…big?

“You haven’t changed at all,” Emmett said with mock disappointment. “I expected a perceptible difference, but here you are, red-faced just like always.”

“Thanks a lot, Emmett,” I said, blushing deeper.

He laughed, “I have to step out for a second”—he paused to wink conspicuously at Alice—“Don’t do anything funny while I’m gone.”

“I’ll try.”

Alice let go of Jasper’s hand and skipped forward, all her teeth sparkling in the bright light. Jasper smiled, too, but kept his distance. He leaned, long and blond, against the post at the foot of the stairs. During the days we’d had to spend cooped up together in Phoenix, I’d thought he’d gotten over his aversion to me. But he’d gone back to exactly how he’d acted before—avoiding me as much as possible—the moment he was free from that temporary obligation to protect me. I knew it wasn’t personal, just a precaution, and I tried not to be overly sensitive about it. Jasper had more trouble sticking to the Cullens’ diet than the rest of them; the scent of human blood was much harder for him to resist than the others—he hadn’t been trying as long.

“Time to open presents,” Alice declared. She put her cool hand under my elbow and towed me to the table with the cake and the shiny packages.

I put on my best martyr face. “Alice, I know I told you I didn’t want anything—”

"But I didn't listen," she interrupted, smug. "Open it." She took the camera from my hands and replaced it with a big, square silver box.

The box was so light that it felt empty. The tag on top said that it was from Emmett, Rosalie, and Jasper. Self-consciously, I tore the paper off and then stared at the box it concealed.

It was something electrical, with lots of numbers in the name. I opened the box, hoping for further illumination. But the box was empty.

"Um…thanks."

Rosalie actually cracked a smile. Jasper laughed. "It's a stereo for your truck," he explained. "Emmett's installing it right now so that you can't return it."

Alice was always one step ahead of me.

"Thanks, Jasper, Rosalie," I told them, grinning as I remembered Edward's complaints about my radio this afternoon—all a setup, apparently. "Thanks, Emmett!" I called more loudly.

I heard his booming laugh from my truck, and I couldn't help laughing, too.

"Open mine and Edward's next," Alice said, so excited her voice was a high-pitched trill. She held a small, flat square in her hand.

I turned to give Edward a basilisk glare. "You promised."

Before he could answer, Emmett bounded through the door. "Just in time!" he crowed. He pushed in

behind Jasper, who had also drifted closer than usual to get a good look.

"I didn't spend a dime," Edward assured me. He brushed a strand of hair from my face, leaving my skin tingling from his touch.

I inhaled deeply and turned to Alice. "Give it to me," I sighed.

Emmett chuckled with delight.

I took the little package, rolling my eyes at Edward while I stuck my finger under the edge of the paper and jerked it under the tape.

"Shoot," I muttered when the paper sliced my finger; I pulled it out to examine the damage. A single drop of blood oozed from the tiny cut.

It all happened very quickly then.

"No!" Edward roared.

He threw himself at me, flinging me back across the table. It fell, as I did, scattering the cake and the presents, the flowers and the plates. I landed in the mess of shattered crystal.

Jasper slammed into Edward, and the sound was like the crash of boulders in a rock slide.

There was another noise, a grisly snarling that seemed to be coming from deep in Jasper's chest. Jasper tried to shove past Edward, snapping his teeth just inches from Edward's face.

Emmett grabbed Jasper from behind in the next second, locking him into his massive steel grip, but

Jasper struggled on, his wild, empty eyes focused only on me.

Beyond the shock, there was also pain. I'd tumbled down to the floor by the piano, with my arms thrown out instinctively to catch my fall, into the jagged shards of glass. Only now did I feel the searing, stinging pain that ran from my wrist to the crease inside my elbow.

Dazed and disoriented, I looked up from the bright red blood pulsing out of my arm—into the fevered eyes of the six suddenly ravenous vampires.

# Chapter 2

## STICHES

Carlisle was the only one who stayed calm. Centuries of experience in the emergency room were evident in his quiet, authoritative voice.

“Emmett, Rose, get Jasper outside.”

Unsmiling for once, Emmett nodded. “Come on, Jasper.”

Jasper struggled against Emmett’s unbreakable grasp, twisting around, reaching toward his brother with his bared teeth, his eyes still past reason.

Edward’s face was whiter than bone as he wheeled to crouch over me, taking a clearly defensive position. A low warning growl slid from between his clenched teeth. I could tell that he wasn’t breathing.

Rosalie, her divine face strangely smug, stepped in front of Jasper—keeping a careful distance from his teeth—and helped Emmett wrestle him through the glass door that Esme held open, one hand pressed over her mouth and nose.

Esme’s heart-shaped face was ashamed. “I’m so sorry, Bella,” she cried as she followed the others into the yard.

“Let me by, Edward,” Carlisle murmured.

A second passed, and then Edward nodded slowly and relaxed his stance.

Carlisle knelt beside me, leaning close to examine my arm. I could feel the shock frozen on my face, and I tried to compose it.

“Here, Carlisle,” Alice said, handing him a towel.

He shook his head. “Too much glass in the wound.” He reached over and ripped a long, thin scrap from the bottom of the white tablecloth. He twisted it around my arm above the elbow to form a tourniquet. The smell of the blood was making me dizzy. My ears rang.

“Bella,” Carlisle said softly. “Do you want me to drive you to the hospital, or would you like me to take care of it here?”

“Here, please,” I whispered. If he took me to the hospital, there would be no way to keep this from Charlie.

“I’ll get your bag,” Alice said.

“Let’s take her to the kitchen table,” Carlisle said to Edward.

Edward lifted me effortlessly, while Carlisle kept the pressure steady on my arm.

“How are you doing, Bella?” Carlisle asked.

“I’m fine.” My voice was reasonably steady, which pleased me.

Edward’s face was like stone.

Alice was there. Carlisle’s black bag was already on the table, a small but brilliant desk light plugged into

the wall. Edward sat me gently into a chair, and Carlisle pulled up another. He went to work at once.

Edward stood over me, still protective, still not breathing.

“Just go, Edward,” I sighed.

“I can handle it,” he insisted. But his jaw was rigid; his eyes burned with the intensity of the thirst he fought, so much worse for him than it was for the others.

“You don’t need to be a hero,” I said. “Carlisle can fix me up without your help. Get some fresh air.”

I winced as Carlisle did something to my arm that stung.

“I’ll stay,” he said.

“Why are you so masochistic?” I mumbled.

Carlisle decided to intercede. “Edward, you may as well go find Jasper before he gets too far. I’m sure he’s upset with himself, and I doubt he’ll listen to anyone but you right now.”

“Yes,” I eagerly agreed. “Go find Jasper.”

“You might as well do something useful,” Alice added.

Edward’s eyes narrowed as we ganged up on him, but, finally, he nodded once and sprinted smoothly through the kitchen’s back door. I was sure he hadn’t taken a breath since I’d sliced my finger.

A numb, dead feeling was spreading through my arm. Though it erased the sting, it reminded me of the

gash, and I watched Carlisle's face carefully to distract me from what his hands were doing. His hair gleamed gold in the bright light as he bent over my arm. I could feel the faint stirrings of unease in the pit of my stomach, but I was determined not to let my usual squeamishness get the best of me. There was no pain now, just a gentle tugging sensation that I tried to ignore. No reason to get sick like a baby.

If she hadn't been in my line of sight, I wouldn't have noticed Alice give up and steal out of the room. With a tiny, apologetic smile on her lips, she disappeared through the kitchen doorway.

"Well, that's everyone," I sighed. "I can clear a room, at least."

"It's not your fault," Carlisle comforted me with a chuckle. "It could happen to anyone."

"Could," I repeated. "But it usually just happens to me."

He laughed again.

His relaxed calm was only more amazing set in direct contrast with everyone else's reaction. I couldn't find any trace of anxiety in his face. He worked with quick, sure movements. The only sound besides our quiet breathing was the soft plink, plink as the tiny fragments of glass dropped one by one to the table.

"How can you do this?" I demanded. "Even Alice and Esme . . ." I trailed off, shaking my head in wonder. Though the rest of them had given up the traditional diet of vampires just as absolutely as Carlisle had, he was the only one who could bear the smell of my blood without suffering from the intense temptation.

Clearly, this was much more difficult than he made it seem.

“Years and years of practice,” he told me. “I barely notice the scent anymore.”

“Do you think it would be harder if you took a vacation from the hospital for a long time? And weren’t around any blood?”

“Maybe.” He shrugged his shoulders, but his hands remained steady. “I’ve never felt the need for an extended holiday.” He flashed a brilliant smile in my direction. “I enjoy my work too much.”

Plink, plink, plink. I was surprised at how much glass there seemed to be in my arm. I was tempted to glance at the growing pile, just to check the size, but I knew that idea would not be helpful to my no-vomiting strategy.

“What is it that you enjoy?” I wondered. It didn’t make sense to me—the years of struggle and self-denial he must have spent to get to the point where he could endure this so easily. Besides, I wanted to keep him talking; the conversation kept my mind off the queasy feeling in my stomach.

His dark eyes were calm and thoughtful as he answered. “Hmm. What I enjoy the very most is when my . . .enhanced abilities let me save someone who would otherwise have been lost. It’s pleasant knowing that, thanks to what I can do, some people’s lives are better because I exist. Even the sense of smell is a useful diagnostic tool at times.” One side of his mouth pulled up in half a smile.

I mulled that over while he poked around, making sure all the glass splinters were gone. Then he

rummaged in his bag for new tools, and I tried not to picture a needle and thread.

“You try very hard to make up for something that was never your fault,” I suggested while a new kind of tugging started at the edges of my skin. “What I mean is, it’s not like you asked for this. You didn’t choose this kind of life, and yet you have to work so hard to be good.”

“I don’t know that I’m making up for anything,” he disagreed lightly. “Like everything in life, I just had to decide what to do with what I was given.”

“That makes it sound too easy.”

He examined my arm again. “There,” he said, snipping a thread. “All done.” He wiped an oversized Q-tip, dripping with some syrup-colored liquid, thoroughly across the operation site. The smell was strange; it made my head spin. The syrup stained my skin.

“In the beginning, though,” I pressed while he taped another long piece of gauze securely in place, sealing it to my skin. “Why did you even think to try a different way than the obvious one?”

His lips turned up in a private smile. “Hasn’t Edward told you this story?”

“Yes. But I’m trying to understand what you were thinking….”

His face was suddenly serious again, and I wondered if his thoughts had gone to the same place that mine had. Wondering what I would be thinking when—I refused to think if—it was me.

“You know my father was a clergyman,” he mused as he cleaned the table carefully, rubbing everything down with wet gauze, and then doing it again. The smell of alcohol burned in my nose. “He had a rather harsh view of the world, which I was already beginning to question before the time that I changed.” Carlisle put all the dirty gauze and the glass slivers into an empty crystal bowl. I didn’t understand what he was doing, even when he lit the match. Then he threw it onto the alcohol-soaked fibers, and the sudden blaze made me jump.

“Sorry,” he apologized. “That ought to do it....So I didn’t agree with my father’s particular brand of faith. But never, in the nearly four hundred years now since I was born, have I ever seen anything to make me doubt whether God exists in some form or the other. Not even the reflection in the mirror.”

I pretended to examine the dressing on my arm to hide my surprise at the direction our conversation had taken. Religion was the last thing I expected, all things considered. My own life was fairly devoid of belief. Charlie considered himself a Lutheran, because that’s what his parents had been, but Sundays he worshipped by the river with a fishing pole in his hand. Reneé tried out a church now and then, but, much like her brief affairs with tennis, pottery, yoga, and French classes, she moved on by the time I was aware of her newest fad.

“I’m sure all this sounds a little bizarre, coming from a vampire.” He grinned, knowing how their casual use of that word never failed to shock me. “But I’m hoping that there is still a point to this life, even for us. It’s a long shot, I’ll admit,” he continued in an offhand voice. “By all accounts, we’re damned regardless. But I hope, maybe foolishly, that we’ll get some measure of credit for trying.”

“I don’t think that’s foolish,” I mumbled. I couldn’t imagine anyone, deity included, who wouldn’t be impressed by Carlisle. Besides, the only kind of heaven I could appreciate would have to include Edward. “And I don’t think anyone else would, either.”

“Actually, you’re the very first one to agree with me.”

“The rest of them don’t feel the same?” I asked, surprised, thinking of only one person in particular.

Carlisle guessed the direction of my thoughts again. “Edward’s with me up to a point. God and heaven exist…and so does hell. But he doesn’t believe there is an afterlife for our kind.” Carlisle’s voice was very soft; he stared out the big window over the sink, into the darkness. “You see, he thinks we’ve lost our souls.”

I immediately thought of Edward’s words this afternoon: unless you want to die—or whatever it is that we do. The lightbulb flicked on over my head.

“That’s the real problem, isn’t it?” I guessed. “That’s why he’s being so difficult about me.”

Carlisle spoke slowly. “I look at my…son. His strength, his goodness, the brightness that shines out of him—and it only fuels that hope, that faith, more than ever. How could there not be more for one such as Edward?”

I nodded in fervent agreement.

“But if I believed as he does . . .” He looked down at me with unfathomable eyes. “If you believed as he did. Could you take away his soul?”

The way he phrased the question thwarted my answer. If he'd asked me whether I would risk my soul for Edward, the reply would be obvious. But would I risk Edward's soul? I pursed my lips unhappily. That wasn't a fair exchange.

"You see the problem."

I shook my head, aware of the stubborn set of my chin.

Carlisle sighed.

"It's my choice," I insisted.

"It's his, too." He held up his hand when he could see that I was about to argue. "Whether he is responsible for doing that to you."

"He's not the only one able to do it." I eyed Carlisle speculatively.

He laughed, abruptly lightening the mood. "Oh, no! You're going to have to work this out with him." But then he sighed. "That's the one part I can never be sure of. I think, in most other ways, that I've done the best I could with what I had to work with. But was it right to doom the others to this life? I can't decide."

I didn't answer. I imagined what my life would be like if Carlisle had resisted the temptation to change his lonely existence…and shuddered.

"It was Edward's mother who made up my mind." Carlisle's voice was almost a whisper. He stared unseeingly out the black windows.

"His mother?" Whenever I'd asked Edward about his parents, he would merely say that they had died long

ago, and his memories were vague. I realized Carlisle's memory of them, despite the brevity of their contact, would be perfectly clear.

"Yes. Her name was Elizabeth. Elizabeth Masen. His father, Edward Senior, never regained consciousness in the hospital. He died in the first wave of the influenza. But Elizabeth was alert until almost the very end. Edward looks a great deal like her—she had that same strange bronze shade to her hair, and her eyes were exactly the same color green."

"His eyes were green?" I murmured, trying to picture it.

"Yes...." Carlisle's ocher eyes were a hundred years away now. "Elizabeth worried obsessively over her son. She hurt her own chances of survival trying to nurse him from her sickbed. I expected that he would go first, he was so much worse off than she was. When the end came for her, it was very quick. It was just after sunset, and I'd arrived to relieve the doctors who'd been working all day. That was a hard time to pretend—there was so much work to be done, and I had no need of rest. How I hated to go back to my house, to hide in the dark and pretend to sleep while so many were dying.

"I went to check Elizabeth and her son first. I'd grown attached—always a dangerous thing to do considering the fragile nature of humans. I could see at once that she'd taken a bad turn. The fever was raging out of control, and her body was too weak to fight anymore.

"She didn't look weak, though, when she glared up at me from her cot.

"'Save him!' she commanded me in the hoarse voice that was all her throat could manage.

"'I'll do everything in my power,' I promised her, taking her hand. The fever was so high, she probably couldn't even tell how unnaturally cold mine felt. Everything felt cold to her skin.

"'You must,' she insisted, clutching at my hand with enough strength that I wondered if she wouldn't pull through the crisis after all. Her eyes were hard, like stones, like emeralds. 'You must do everything in your power. What others cannot do, that is what you must do for my Edward.'

"It frightened me. She looked at me with those piercing eyes, and, for one instant, I felt certain that she knew my secret. Then the fever overwhelmed her, and she never regained consciousness. She died within an hour of making her demand.

"I'd spent decades considering the idea of creating a companion for myself. Just one other creature who could really know me, rather than what I pretended to be. But I could never justify it to myself—doing what had been done to me.

"There Edward lay, dying. It was clear that he had only hours left. Beside him, his mother, her face somehow not yet peaceful, not even in death."

Carlisle saw it all again, his memory unblurred by the intervening century. I could see it clearly, too, as he spoke—the despair of the hospital, the overwhelming atmosphere of death. Edward burning with fever, his life slipping away with each tick of the clock…I shuddered again, and forced the picture from my mind.

"Elizabeth's words echoed in my head. How could she guess what I could do? Could anyone really want that for her son?

"I looked at Edward. Sick as he was, he was still beautiful. There was something pure and good about his face. The kind of face I would have wanted my son to have.

"After all those years of indecision, I simply acted on a whim. I wheeled his mother to the morgue first, and then I came back for him. No one noticed that he was still breathing. There weren't enough hands, enough eyes, to keep track of half of what the patients needed. The morgue was empty—of the living, at least. I stole him out the back door, and carried him across the rooftops back to my home.

"I wasn't sure what had to be done. I settled for recreating the wounds I'd received myself, so many centuries earlier in London. I felt bad about that later. It was more painful and lingering than necessary.

"I wasn't sorry, though. I've never been sorry that I saved Edward." He shook his head, coming back to the present. He smiled at me. "I suppose I should take you home now."

"I'll do that," Edward said. He came through the shadowy dining room, walking slowly for him. His face was smooth, unreadable, but there was something wrong with his eyes—something he was trying very hard to hide. I felt a spasm of unease in my stomach.

"Carlisle can take me," I said. I looked down at my shirt; the light blue cotton was soaked and spotted with my blood. My right shoulder was covered in thick pink frosting.

"I'm fine." Edward's voice was unemotional. "You'll need to change anyway. You'd give Charlie a heart

attack the way you look. I'll have Alice get you something." He strode out the kitchen door again.

I looked at Carlisle anxiously. "He's very upset."

"Yes," Carlisle agreed. "Tonight is exactly the kind of thing that he fears the most. You being put in danger, because of what we are."

"It's not his fault."

"It's not yours, either."

I looked away from his wise, beautiful eyes. I couldn't agree with that.

Carlisle offered me his hand and helped me up from the table. I followed him out into the main room. Esme had come back; she was mopping the floor where I'd fallen—with straight bleach from the smell of it.

"Esme, let me do that." I could feel that my face was bright red again.

"I'm already done." She smiled up at me. "How do you feel?"

"I'm fine," I assured her. "Carlisle sews faster than any other doctor I've had."

They both chuckled.

Alice and Edward came in the back doors. Alice hurried to my side, but Edward hung back, his face indecipherable.

"C'mon," Alice said. "I'll get you something less macabre to wear."

She found me a shirt of Esme's that was close to the same color mine had been. Charlie wouldn't notice, I was sure. The long white bandage on my arm didn't look nearly as serious when I was no longer spattered in gore. Charlie was never surprised to see me bandaged.

"Alice," I whispered as she headed back to the door.

"Yes?" She kept her voice low, too, and looked at me curiously, her head cocked to the side.

"How bad is it?" I couldn't be sure if my whispering was a wasted effort. Even though we were upstairs, with the door closed, perhaps he could hear me.

Her face tensed. "I'm not sure yet."

"How's Jasper?"

She sighed. "He's very unhappy with himself. It's all so much more of challenge for him, and he hates feeling weak."

"It's not his fault. You'll tell him that I'm not mad at him, not at all, won't you?"

"Of course."

Edward was waiting for me by the front door. As I got to the bottom of the staircase, he held it open without a word.

"Take your things!" Alice cried as I walked warily toward Edward. She scooped up the two packages, one half-opened, and my camera from under the piano, and pressed them into my good arm. "You can thank me later, when you've opened them."

Esme and Carlisle both said a quiet goodnight. I could see them stealing quick glances at their impassive son, much like I was.

It was a relief to be outside; I hurried past the lanterns and the roses, now unwelcome reminders. Edward kept pace with me silently. He opened the passenger side for me, and I climbed in without complaint.

On the dashboard was a big red ribbon, stuck to the new stereo. I pulled it off, throwing it to the floor. As Edward slid into the other side, I kicked the ribbon under my seat.

He didn't look at me or the stereo. Neither of us switched it on, and the silence was somehow intensified by the sudden thunder of the engine. He drove too fast down the dark, serpentine lane.

The silence was making me insane.

"Say something," I finally begged as he turned onto the freeway.

"What do you want me to say?" he asked in a detached voice.

I cringed at his remoteness. "Tell me you forgive me."

That brought a flicker of life to his face—a flicker of anger. "Forgive you? For what?"

"If I'd been more careful, nothing would have happened."

"Bella, you gave yourself a paper cut—that hardly deserves the death penalty."

"It's still my fault."

My words opened up the floodgate.

"Your fault? If you'd cut yourself at Mike Newton's house, with Jessica there and Angela and your other normal friends, the worst that could possibly have happened would be what? Maybe they couldn't find you a bandage? If you'd tripped and knocked over a pile of glass plates on your own—without someone throwing you into them—even then, what's the worst? You'd get blood on the seats when they drove you to the emergency room? Mike Newton could have held your hand while they stitched you up—and he wouldn't be fighting the urge to kill you the whole time he was there. Don't try to take any of this on yourself, Bella. It will only make me more disgusted with myself."

"How the hell did Mike Newton end up in this conversation?" I demanded.

"Mike Newton ended up in this conversation because Mike Newton would be a hell of a lot healthier for you to be with," he growled.

"I'd rather die than be with Mike Newton," I protested. "I'd rather die than be with anyone but you."

"Don't be melodramatic, please."

"Well then, don't you be ridiculous."

He didn't answer. He glared through the windshield, his expression black.

I racked my brain for some way to salvage the evening. When we pulled up in front of my house, I still hadn't come up with anything.

He killed the engine, but his hands stayed clenched around the steering wheel.

“Will you stay tonight?” I asked.

“I should go home.”

The last thing I wanted was for him to go wallow in remorse.

“For my birthday,” I pressed.

“You can’t have it both ways—either you want people to ignore your birthday or you don’t. One or the other.” His voice was stern, but not as serious as before. I breathed a silent sigh of relief.

“Okay. I’ve decided that I don’t want you to ignore my birthday. I’ll see you upstairs.”

I hopped out, reaching back in for my packages. He frowned.

“You don’t have to take those.”

“I want them,” I responded automatically, and then wondered if he was using reverse psychology.

“No, you don’t. Carlisle and Esme spent money on you.”

“I’ll live.” I tucked the presents awkwardly under my good arm and slammed the door behind me. He was out of the truck and by my side in less than a second.

“Let me carry them, at least,” he said as he took them away. “I’ll be in your room.”

I smiled. “Thanks.”

"Happy birthday," he sighed, and leaned down to touch his lips to mine.

I reached up on my toes to make the kiss last longer when he pulled away. He smiled my favorite crooked smile, and then he disappeared into the darkness.

The game was still on; as soon as I walked through the front door I could hear the announcer rambling over the babble of the crowd.

"Bell?" Charlie called.

"Hey, Dad," I said as I came around the corner. I held my arm close to my side. The slight pressure burned, and I wrinkled my nose. The anesthetic was apparently losing its effectiveness.

"How was it?" Charlie lounged across the sofa with his bare feet propped up on the arm. What was left of his curly brown hair was crushed flat on one side.

"Alice went overboard. Flowers, cake, candles, presents—the whole bit."

"What did they get you?"

"A stereo for my truck." And various unknowns.

"Wow."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Well, I'm calling it a night."

"I'll see you in the morning."

I waved. "See ya."

"What happened to your arm?"

I flushed and cursed silently. “I tripped. It’s nothing.”

“Bella,” he sighed, shaking his head.

“Goodnight, Dad.”

I hurried up to the bathroom, where I kept my pajamas for just such nights as these. I shrugged into the matching tank top and cotton pants that I’d gotten to replace the holey sweats I used to wear to bed, wincing as the movement pulled at the stitches. I washed my face one-handed, brushed my teeth, and then skipped to my room.

He was sitting in the center of my bed, toying idly with one of the silver boxes.

“Hi,” he said. His voice was sad. He was wallowing.

I went to the bed, pushed the presents out of his hands, and climbed into his lap.

“Hi.” I snuggled into his stone chest. “Can I open my presents now?”

“Where did the enthusiasm come from?” he wondered.

“You made me curious.”

I picked up the long flat rectangle that must have been from Carlisle and Esme.

“Allow me,” he suggested. He took the gift frommy hand and tore the silver paper off with one fluidmovement. He handed the rectangular white box back to me.

“Are you sure I can handle lifting the lid?” I muttered, but he ignored me.

Inside the box was a long thick piece of paper with an overwhelming amount of fine print. It took me a minute to get the gist of the information.

“We’re going to Jacksonville?” And I was excited, in spite of myself. It was a voucher for plane tickets, for both me and Edward.

“That’s the idea.”

“I can’t believe it. Reneé is going to flip! You don’t mind, though, do you? It’s sunny, you’ll have to stay inside all day.”

“I think I can handle it,” he said, and then frowned. “If I’d had any idea that you could respond to a gift this appropriately, I would have made you open it in front of Carlisle and Esme. I thought you’d complain.”

“Well, of course it’s too much. But I get to take you with me!”

He chuckled. “Now I wish I’d spent money on your present. I didn’t realize that you were capable of being reasonable.”

I set the tickets aside and reached for his present, my curiosity rekindled. He took it from me and unwrapped it like the first one.

He handed back a clear CD jewel case, with a blank silver CD inside.

“What is it?” I asked, perplexed.

He didn’t say anything; he took the CD and reached around me to put it in the CD player on the bedside table. He hit play, and we waited in silence. Then the music began.

I listened, speechless and wide-eyed. I knew he was waiting for my reaction, but I couldn't talk. Tears welled up, and I reached up to wipe them away before they could spill over.

"Does your arm hurt?" he asked anxiously.

"No, it's not my arm. It's beautiful, Edward. You couldn't have given me anything I would love more. I can't believe it." I shut up, so I could listen.

It was his music, his compositions. The first piece on the CD was my lullaby.

"I didn't think you would let me get a piano so I could play for you here," he explained.

"You're right."

"How does your arm feel?"

"Just fine." Actually, it was starting to blaze under the bandage. I wanted ice. I would have settled for his hand, but that would have given me away.

"I'll get you some Tylenol."

"I don't need anything," I protested, but he slid me off his lap and headed for the door.

"Charlie," I hissed. Charlie wasn't exactly aware that Edward frequently stayed over. In fact, he would have a stroke if that fact were brought to his attention. But I didn't feel too guilty for deceiving him. It wasn't as if we were up to anything he wouldn't want me to be up to. Edward and his rules…

"He won't catch me," Edward promised as he disappeared silently out the door…and returned,

catching the door before it had swung back to touch the frame. He had the glass from the bathroom and the bottle of pills in one hand.

I took the pills he handed me without arguing—I knew I would lose the argument. And my arm really was starting to bother me.

My lullaby continued, soft and lovely, in the background.

"It's late," Edward noted. He scooped me up off the bed with one arm, and pulled the cover back with the other. He put me down with my head on my pillow and tucked the quilt around me. He lay down next to me—on top of the blanket so I wouldn't get chilled—and put his arm over me.

I leaned my head against his shoulder and sighed happily.

"Thanks again," I whispered.

"You're welcome."

It was quiet for a long moment as I listened to my lullaby drift to a close. Another song began. I recognized Esme's favorite.

"What are you thinking about?" I wondered in a whisper.

He hesitated for a second before he told me. "I was thinking about right and wrong, actually."

I felt a chill tingle along my spine.

"Remember how I decided that I wanted you to not ignore my birthday?" I asked quickly, hoping it wasn't too clear that I was trying to distract him.

"Yes," he agreed, wary.

"Well, I was thinking, since it's still my birthday, that I'd like you to kiss me again."

"You're greedy tonight."

"Yes, I am—but please, don't do anything you don't want to do," I added, piqued.

He laughed, and then sighed. "Heaven forbid that I should do anything I don't want to do," he said in a strangely desperate tone as he put his hand under my chin and pulled my face up to his.

The kiss began much the same as usual—Edward was as careful as ever, and my heart began to overreact like it always did. And then something seemed to change. Suddenly his lips became much more urgent, his free hand twisted into my hair and held my face securely to his. And, though my hands tangled in his hair, too, and though I was clearly beginning to cross his cautious lines, for once he didn't stop me. His body was cold through the thin quilt, but I crushed myself against him eagerly.

When he stopped it was abrupt; he pushed me away with gentle, firm hands.

I collapsed back onto my pillow, gasping, my head spinning. Something tugged at my memory, elusive, on the edges.

"Sorry," he said, and he was breathless, too. "That was out of line."

"I don't mind," I panted.

He frowned at me in the darkness. "Try to sleep, Bella."

"No, I want you to kiss me again."

"You're overestimating my self-control."

"Which is tempting you more, my blood or my body?" I challenged.

"It's a tie." He grinned briefly in spite of himself, and then was serious again. "Now, why don't you stop pushing your luck and go to sleep?"

"Fine," I agreed, snuggling closer to him. I really did feel exhausted. It had been a long day in so many ways, yet I felt no sense of relief at its end. Almost as if something worse was coming tomorrow. It was a silly premonition—what could be worse than today? Just the shock catching up with me, no doubt.

Trying to be sneaky about it, I pressed my injured arm against his shoulder, so his cool skin would sooth the burning. It felt better at once.

I was halfway asleep, maybe more, when I realized what his kiss had reminded me of: last spring, when he'd had to leave me to throw James off my trail, Edward had kissed me goodbye, not knowing when—or if—we would see each other again. This kiss had the same almost painful edge for some reason I couldn't imagine. I shuddered into unconsciousness, as if I were already having a nightmare.

# Chapter 3

## THE END

I felt absolutely hideous in the morning. I hadn't slept well; my arm burned and my head ached. It didn’t help my outlook that Edward’s face was smooth and remote as he kissed my forehead quickly and ducked out my window. I was afraid of the time I’d spent unconscious, afraid that he might have been thinking about right and wrong again while he watched me sleep. The anxiety seemed to ratchet up the intensity of the pounding in my head.

Edward was waiting for me at school, as usual, but his face was still wrong. There was something buried in his eyes that I couldn’t be sure of—and it scared me. I didn’t want to bring up last night, but I wasn’t sure if avoiding the subject would be worse.

He opened my door for me.

“How do you feel?”

“Perfect,” I lied, cringing as the sound of the slamming door echoed in my head.

We walked in silence, he shortening his stride to match mine. There were so many questions I wanted to ask, but most of those questions would have to wait, because they were for Alice: How was Jasper this morning? What had they said when I was gone? What had Rosalie said? And most importantly, what could she see happening now in her strange, imperfect visions of the future? Could she guess what Edward was thinking, why he was so gloomy? Was there a foundation for the tenuous, instinctive fears that I couldn’t seem to shake?

The morning passed slowly. I was impatient to see Alice, though I wouldn't be able to really talk to her with Edward there. Edward remained aloof. Occasionally he would ask about my arm, and I would lie.

Alice usually beat us to lunch; she didn't have to keep pace with a sloth like me. But she wasn't at the table, waiting with a tray of food she wouldn't eat.

Edward didn't say anything about her absence. I wondered to myself if her class was running late—until I saw Conner and Ben, who were in her fourth hour French class.

"Where's Alice?" I asked Edward anxiously.

He looked at the granola bar he was slowly pulverizing between his fingertips while he answered. "She's with Jasper."

"Is he okay?"

"He's gone away for a while."

"What? Where?"

Edward shrugged. "Nowhere in particular."

"And Alice, too," I said with quiet desperation. Of course, if Jasper needed her, she would go.

"Yes. She'll be gone for a while. She was trying to convince him to go to Denali."

Denali was where the one other band of unique vampires—good ones like the Cullens—lived. Tanya and her family. I'd heard of them now and again. Edward had run to them last winter when my arrival

had made Forks difficult for him. Laurent, the most civilized member of James's little coven, had gone there rather than siding with James against the Cullens. It made sense for Alice to encourage Jasper to go there.

I swallowed, trying to dislodge the sudden lump in my throat. The guilt made my head bow and my shoulders slump. I'd run them out of their home, just like Rosalie and Emmett. I was a plague.

"Is your arm bothering you?" he asked solicitously.

"Who cares about my stupid arm?" I muttered in disgust.

He didn't answer, and I put my head down on the table.

By the end of the day, the silence was becoming ridiculous. I didn't want to be the one to break it, but apparently that was my only choice if I ever wanted him to talk to me again.

"You'll come over later tonight?" I asked as he walked me—silently—to my truck. He always came over.

"Later?"

It pleased me that he seemed surprised. "I have to work. I had to trade with Mrs. Newton to get yesterday off."

"Oh," he murmured.

"So you'll come over when I'm home, though, right?" I hated that I felt suddenly unsure about this.

"If you want me to."

"I always want you," I reminded him, with perhaps a little more intensity than the conversation required.

I expected he would laugh, or smile, or react somehow to my words.

"All right, then," he said indifferently.

He kissed my forehead again before he shut the door on me. Then he turned his back and loped gracefully toward his car.

I was able to drive out of the parking lot before the panic really hit, but I was hyperventilating by the time I got to Newton's.

He just needed time, I told myself. He would get over this. Maybe he was sad because his family was disappearing. But Alice and Jasper would come back soon, and Rosalie and Emmett, too. If it would help, I would stay away from the big white house on the river—I'd never set foot there again. That didn't matter. I'd still see Alice at school. She would have to come back for school, right? And she was at my place all the time anyway. She wouldn't want to hurt Charlie's feelings by staying away.

No doubt I would also run into Carlisle with regularity—in the emergency room.

After all, what had happened last night was nothing. Nothing had happened. So I fell down—that was the story of my life. Compared to last spring, it seemed especially unimportant. James had left me broken and nearly dead from loss of blood—and yet Edward had handled the interminable weeks in the hospital much better than this. Was it because, this time, it wasn't an enemy he'd had to protect me from? Because it was his brother?

Maybe it would be better if he took me away, rather than his family being scattered. I grew slightly less depressed as I considered all the uninterrupted alone time. If he could just last through the school year, Charlie wouldn't be able to object. We could go away to college, or pretend that's what we were doing, like Rosalie and Emmett this year. Surely Edward could wait a year. What was a year to an immortal? It didn't even seem like that much to me.

I was able to talk myself into enough composure to handle getting out of the truck and walking to the store. Mike Newton had beaten me here today, and he smiled and waved when I came in. I grabbed my vest, nodding vaguely in his direction. I was still imagining pleasant scenarios that consisted of me running away with Edward to various exotic locales.

Mike interrupted my fantasy. "How was your birthday?"

"Ugh," I mumbled. "I'm glad it's over."

Mike looked at me from the corners of his eyes like I was crazy.

Work dragged. I wanted to see Edward again, praying that he would be past the worst of this, whatever it was exactly, by the time I saw him again. It's nothing, I told myself over and over again. Everything will go back to normal.

The relief I felt when I turned onto my street and saw Edward's silver car parked in front of my house was an overwhelming, heady thing. And it bothered me deeply that it should be that way.

I hurried through the front door, calling out before I was completely inside.

"Dad? Edward?"

As I spoke, I could hear the distinctive theme music from ESPN's SportsCenter coming from the living room.

"In here," Charlie called.

I hung my raincoat on its peg and hurried around the corner.

Edward was in the armchair, my father on the sofa. Both had their eyes trained on the TV. The focus was normal for my father. Not so much for Edward.

"Hi," I said weakly.

"Hey, Bella," my father answered, eyes never moving. "We just had cold pizza. I think it's still on the table."

"Okay."

I waited in the doorway. Finally, Edward looked over at me with a polite smile. "I'll be right behind you," he promised. His eyes strayed back to the TV.

I stared for another minute, shocked. Neither one seemed to notice. I could feel something, panic maybe, building up in my chest. I escaped to the kitchen.

The pizza held no interest for me. I sat in my chair, pulled my knees up, and wrapped my arms around them. Something was very wrong, maybe more wrong than I'd realized. The sounds of male bonding and banter continued from the TV set.

I tried to get control of myself, to reason with myself. What's the worst that can happen? I flinched. That

was definitely the wrong question to ask. I was having a hard time breathing right.

Okay, I thought again, what's the worst I can live through? I didn't like that question so much, either. But I thought through the possibilities I'd considered today.

Staying away from Edward's family. Of course, he wouldn't expect Alice to be part of that. But if Jasper was off limits, that would lessen the time I could have with her. I nodded to myself—I could live with that.

Or going away. Maybe he wouldn't want to wait till the end of the school year, maybe it would have to be now.

In front of me, on the table, my presents from Charlie and Reneé were where I had left them, the camera I hadn't had the chance to use at the Cullens' sitting beside the album. I touched the pretty cover of the scrapbook my mother had given me, and sighed, thinking of Reneé. Somehow, living without her for as long as I had did not make the idea of a more permanent separation easier. And Charlie would be left all alone here, abandoned. They would both be so hurt…

But we'd come back, right? We'd visit, of course, wouldn't we?

I couldn't be certain about the answer to that.

I leaned my cheek against my knee, staring at the physical tokens of my parents' love. I'd known this path I'd chosen was going to be hard. And, after all, I was thinking about the worst-case scenario—the very worst I could live through.

I touched the scrapbook again, flipping the front cover over. Little metal corners were already in place to hold the first picture. It wasn't a half-bad idea, to make some record of my life here. I felt a strange urge to get started. Maybe I didn't have that long left in Forks.

I toyed with the wrist strap on the camera, wondering about the first picture on the roll. Could it possibly turn out anything close to the original? I doubted it. But he didn't seem worried that it would be blank. I chuckled to myself, thinking of his carefree laughter last night. The chuckle died away. So much had changed, and so abruptly. It made me feel a little bit dizzy, like I was standing on an edge, a precipice somewhere much too high.

I didn't want to think about that anymore. I grabbed the camera and headed up the stairs.

My room hadn't really changed all that much in the seventeen years since my mother had been here. The walls were still light blue, the same yellowed lace curtains hung in front of the window. There was a bed, rather than a crib, but she would recognize the quilt draped untidily over the top—it had been a gift from Gran.

Regardless, I snapped a picture of my room. There wasn't much else I could do tonight—it was too dark outside—and the feeling was growing stronger, it was almost a compulsion now. I would record everything about Forks before I had to leave it.

Change was coming. I could feel it. It wasn't a pleasant prospect, not when life was perfect the way it was.

I took my time coming back down the stairs, camera in hand, trying to ignore the butterflies in my

stomach as I thought of the strange distance I didn't want to see in Edward's eyes. He would get over this. Probably he was worried that I would be upset when he asked me to leave. I would let him work through it without meddling. And I would be prepared when he asked.

I had the camera ready as I leaned around the corner, being sneaky. I was sure there was no chance that I had caught Edward by surprise, but he didn't look up. I felt a brief shiver as something icy twisted in my stomach; I ignored that and took the picture.

They both looked at me then. Charlie frowned. Edward's face was empty, expressionless.

"What are you doing, Bella?" Charlie complained.

"Oh, come on." I pretended to smile as I went to sit on the floor in front of the sofa where Charlie lounged. "You know Mom will be calling soon to ask if I'm using my presents. I have to get to work before she can get her feelings hurt."

"Why are you taking pictures of me, though?" he grumbled.

"Because you're so handsome," I replied, keeping it light. "And because, since you bought the camera, you're obligated to be one of my subjects."

He mumbled something unintelligible.

"Hey, Edward," I said with admirable indifference. "Take one of me and my dad together."

I threw the camera toward him, carefully avoiding his eyes, and knelt beside the arm of the sofa where Charlie's face was. Charlie sighed.

"You need to smile, Bella," Edward murmured.

I did my best, and the camera flashed.

"Let me take one of you kids," Charlie suggested. I knew he was just trying to shift the camera's focus from himself.

Edward stood and lightly tossed him the camera.

I went to stand beside Edward, and the arrangement felt formal and strange to me. He put one hand lightly on my shoulder, and I wrapped my arm more securely around his waist. I wanted to look at his face, but I was afraid to.

"Smile, Bella," Charlie reminded me again.

I took a deep breath and smiled. The flash blinded me.

"Enough pictures for tonight," Charlie said then, shoving the camera into a crevice of the sofa cushions and rolling over it. "You don't have to use the whole roll now."

Edward dropped his hand from my shoulder and twisted casually out of my arm. He sat back down in the armchair.

I hesitated, and then went to sit against the sofa again. I was suddenly so frightened that my hands were shaking. I pressed them into my stomach to hide them, put my chin on my knees and stared at the TV screen in front of me, seeing nothing.

When the show ended, I hadn't moved an inch. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Edward stand.

"I'd better get home," he said.

Charlie didn't look up from the commercial. "See ya."

I got awkwardly to my feet—I was stiff from sitting so still—and followed Edward out the front door. He went straight to his car.

"Will you stay?" I asked, no hope in my voice.

I expected his answer, so it didn't hurt as much.

"Not tonight."

I didn't ask for a reason.

He got in his car and drove away while I stood there, unmoving. I barely noticed that it was raining. I waited, without knowing what I waited for, until the door opened behind me.

"Bella, what are you doing?" Charlie asked, surprised to see me standing there alone and dripping.

"Nothing." I turned and trudged back to the house.

It was a long night, with little in the way of rest.

I got up as soon as there was a faint light outside my window. I dressed for school mechanically, waiting for the clouds to brighten. When I had eaten a bowl of cereal, I decided that it was light enough for pictures. I took one of my truck, and then the front of the house. I turned and snapped a few of the forest by Charlie's house. Funny how it didn't seem sinister like it used to. I realized I would miss this—the green, the timelessness, the mystery of the woods. All of it.

I put the camera in my school bag before I left. I tried to concentrate on my new project rather than the fact that Edward apparently hadn't gotten over things during the night.

Along with the fear, I was beginning to feel impatience. How long could this last?

It lasted through the morning. He walked silently beside me, never seeming to actually look at me. I tried to concentrate on my classes, but not even English could hold my attention. Mr. Berty had to repeat his question about Lady Capulet twice before I realized he was talking to me. Edward whispered the correct answer under his breath and then went back to ignoring me.

At lunch, the silence continued. I felt like I was going to start screaming at any moment, so, to distract myself, I leaned across the table's invisible line and spoke to Jessica.

"Hey, Jess?"

"What's up, Bella?"

"Could you do me a favor?" I asked, reaching into my bag. "My mom wants me to get some pictures of my friends for a scrapbook. So, take some pictures of everybody, okay?"

I handed her the camera.

"Sure," she said, grinning, and turned to snap a candid shot of Mike with his mouth full.

A predictable picture war ensued. I watched them hand the camera around the table, giggling and flirting and complaining about being on film. It

seemed strangely childish. Maybe I just wasn't in the mood for normal human behavior today.

"Uh-oh," Jessica said apologetically as she returned the camera. "I think we used all your film."

"That's okay. I think I already got pictures of everything else I needed."

After school, Edward walked me back to the parking lot in silence. I had to work again, and for once, I was glad. Time with me obviously wasn't helping things. Maybe time alone would be better.

I dropped my film off at the Thriftway on my way to Newton's, and then picked up the developed pictures after work. At home, I said a brief hi to Charlie, grabbed a granola bar from the kitchen, and hurried up to my room with the envelope of photographs tucked under my arm.

I sat in the middle of my bed and opened the envelope with wary curiosity. Ridiculously, I still half expected the first print to be a blank.

When I pulled it out, I gasped aloud. Edward looked just as beautiful as he did in real life, staring at me out of the picture with the warm eyes I'd missed for the past few days. It was almost uncanny that anyone could look so…so…beyond description. No thousand words could equal this picture.

I flipped through the rest of the stack quickly once, and then laid three of them out on the bed side by side.

The first was the picture of Edward in the kitchen, his warm eyes touched with tolerant amusement. The second was Edward and Charlie, watching ESPN. The

difference in Edward's expression was severe. His eyes were careful here, reserved. Still breathtakingly beautiful, but his face was colder, more like a sculpture, less alive.

The last was the picture of Edward and me standing awkwardly side by side. Edward's face was the same as the last, cold and statue-like. But that wasn't the most troubling part of this photograph. The contrast between the two of us was painful. He looked like a god. I looked very average, even for a human, almost shamefully plain. I flipped the picture over with a feeling of disgust.

Instead of doing my homework, I stayed up to put my pictures into the album. With a ballpoint pen I scrawled captions under all the pictures, the names and the dates. I got to the picture of Edward and me, and, without looking at it too long, I folded it in half and stuck it under the metal tab, Edward-side up.

When I was done, I stuffed the second set of prints in a fresh envelope and penned a long thank-you letter to Reneé.

Edward still hadn't come over. I didn't want to admit that he was the reason I'd stayed up so late, but of course he was. I tried to remember the last time he'd stayed away like this, without an excuse, a phone call…He never had.

Again, I didn't sleep well.

School followed the silent, frustrating, terrifying pattern of the last two days. I felt relief when I saw Edward waiting for me in the parking lot, but it faded quickly. He was no different, unless maybe more remote.

It was hard to even remember the reason for all this mess. My birthday already felt like the distant past. If only Alice would come back. Soon. Before this got any more out of hand.

But I couldn't count on that. I decided that, if I couldn't talk to him today, really talk, then I was going to see Carlisle tomorrow. I had to do something.

After school, Edward and I were going to talk it out, I promised myself. I wasn't accepting any excuses.

He walked me to my truck, and I steeled myself to make my demands.

"Do you mind if I come over today?" he asked before we got to the truck, beating me to the punch.

"Of course not."

"Now?" he asked again, opening my door for me.

"Sure," I kept my voice even, though I didn't like the urgency in his tone. "I was just going to drop a letter for Reneé in the mailbox on the way. I'll meet you there."

He looked at the fat envelope on the passenger seat. Suddenly, he reached over me and snagged it.

"I'll do it," he said quietly. "And I'll still beat you there." He smiled my favorite crooked smile, but it was wrong. It didn't reach his eyes.

"Okay," I agreed, unable to smile back. He shut the door, and headed toward his car.

He did beat me home. He was parked in Charlie's spot when I pulled up in front of the house. That was a

bad sign. He didn't plan to stay, then. I shook my head and took a deep breath, trying to locate some courage.

He got out of his car when I stepped out of the truck, and came to meet me. He reached to take my book bag from me. That was normal. But he shoved it back onto the seat. That was not normal.

"Come for a walk with me," he suggested in an unemotional voice, taking my hand.

I didn't answer. I couldn't think of a way to protest, but I instantly knew that I wanted to. I didn't like this. This is bad, this is very bad, the voice in my head repeated again and again.

But he didn't wait for an answer. He pulled me along toward the east side of the yard, where the forest encroached. I followed unwillingly, trying to think through the panic. It was what I wanted, I reminded myself. The chance to talk it all through. So why was the panic choking me?

We'd gone only a few steps into the trees when he stopped. We were barely on the trail—I could still see the house.

Some walk.

Edward leaned against a tree and stared at me, his expression unreadable.

"Okay, let's talk," I said. It sounded braver than it felt.

He took a deep breath.

"Bella, we're leaving."

I took a deep breath, too. This was an acceptable option. I thought I was prepared. But I still had to ask.

“Why now? Another year—”

“Bella, it’s time. How much longer could we stay in Forks, after all? Carlisle can barely pass for thirty, and he’s claiming thirty-three now. We’d have to start over soon regardless.”

His answer confused me. I thought the point of leaving was to let his family live in peace. Why did we have to leave if they were going? I stared at him, trying to understand what he meant.

He stared back coldly.

With a roll of nausea, I realized I’d misunderstood.

“When you say we—,” I whispered.

“I mean my family and myself.” Each word separate and distinct.

I shook my head back and forth mechanically, trying to clear it. He waited without any sign of impatience. It took a few minutes before I could speak.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll come with you.”

“You can’t, Bella. Where we’re going…It’s not the right place for you.”

“Where you are is the right place for me.”

“I’m no good for you, Bella.”

"Don't be ridiculous." I wanted to sound angry, but it just sounded like I was begging. "You're the very best part of my life."

"My world is not for you," he said grimly.

"What happened with Jasper—that was nothing, Edward! Nothing!"

"You're right," he agreed. "It was exactly what was to be expected."

"You promised! In Phoenix, you promised that you would stay—"

"As long as that was best for you," he interrupted to correct me.

"No! This is about my soul, isn't it?" I shouted, furious, the words exploding out of me—somehow it still sounded like a plea. "Carlisle told me about that, and I don't care, Edward. I don't care! You can have my soul. I don't want it without you—it's yours already!"

He took a deep breath and stared, unseeingly, at the ground for a long moment. His mouth twisted the tiniest bit. When he finally looked up, his eyes were different, harder—like the liquid gold had frozen solid.

"Bella, I don't want you to come with me." He spoke the words slowly and precisely, his cold eyes on my face, watching as I absorbed what he was really saying.

There was a pause as I repeated the words in my head a few times, sifting through them for their real intent.

"You…don't…want me?" I tried out the words, confused by the way they sounded, placed in that order.

"No."

I stared, uncomprehending, into his eyes. He stared back without apology. His eyes were like topaz—hard and clear and very deep. I felt like I could see into them for miles and miles, yet nowhere in their bottomless depths could I see a contradiction to the word he'd spoken.

"Well, that changes things." I was surprised by how calm and reasonable my voice sounded. It must be because I was so numb. I couldn't realize what he was telling me. It still didn't make any sense.

He looked away into the trees as he spoke again. "Of course, I'll always love you…in a way. But what happened the other night made me realize that it's time for a change. Because I'm…tired of pretending to be something I'm not, Bella. I am not human." He looked back, and the icy planes of his perfect face were not human. "I've let this go on much too long, and I'm sorry for that."

"Don't." My voice was just a whisper now; awareness was beginning to seep through me, trickling like acid through my veins. "Don't do this."

He just stared at me, and I could see from his eyes that my words were far too late. He already had.

"You're not good for me, Bella." He turned his earlier words around, and so I had no argument. How well I knew that I wasn't good enough for him.

I opened my mouth to say something, and then closed it again. He waited patiently, his face wiped clean of all emotion. I tried again.

“If…that’s what you want.”

He nodded once.

My whole body went numb. I couldn’t feel anything below the neck.

“I would like to ask one favor, though, if that’s not too much,” he said.

I wonder what he saw on my face, because something flickered across his own face in response. But, before I could identify it, he’d composed his features into the same serene mask.

“Anything,” I vowed, my voice faintly stronger.

As I watched, his frozen eyes melted. The gold became liquid again, molten, burning down into mine with an intensity that was overwhelming.

“Don’t do anything reckless or stupid,” he ordered, no longer detached. “Do you understand what I’m saying?”

I nodded helplessly.

His eyes cooled, the distance returned. “I’m thinking of Charlie, of course. He needs you. Take care of yourself—for him.”

I nodded again. “I will,” I whispered.

He seemed to relax just a little.

"And I'll make you a promise in return," he said. "I promise that this will be the last time you'll see me. I won't come back. I won't put you through anything like this again. You can go on with your life without any more interference from me. It will be as if I'd never existed."

My knees must have started to shake, because the trees were suddenly wobbling. I could hear the blood pounding faster than normal behind my ears. His voice sounded farther away.

He smiled gently. "Don't worry. You're human—your memory is no more than a sieve. Time heals all wounds for your kind."

"And your memories?" I asked. It sounded like there was something stuck in my throat, like I was choking.

"Well"—he hesitated for a short second—"I won't forget. But my kind…we're very easily distracted." He smiled; the smile was tranquil and it did not touch his eyes.

He took a step away from me. "That's everything, I suppose. We won't bother you again."

The plural caught my attention. That surprised me; I would have thought I was beyond noticing anything.

"Alice isn't coming back," I realized. I don't know how he heard me—the words made no sound—but he seemed to understand.

He shook his head slowly, always watching my face.

"No. They're all gone. I stayed behind to tell you goodbye."

"Alice is gone?" My voice was blank with disbelief.

"She wanted to say goodbye, but I convinced her that a clean break would be better for you."

I was dizzy; it was hard to concentrate. His words swirled around in my head, and I heard the doctor at the hospital in Phoenix, last spring, as he showed me the X-rays. You can see it's a clean break, his finger traced along the picture of my severed bone. That's good. It will heal more easily, more quickly.

I tried to breathe normally. I needed to concentrate, to find a way out of this nightmare.

"Goodbye, Bella," he said in the same quiet, peaceful voice.

"Wait!" I choked out the word, reaching for him, willing my deadened legs to carry me forward.

I thought he was reaching for me, too. But his cold hands locked around my wrists and pinned them to my sides. He leaned down, and pressed his lips very lightly to my forehead for the briefest instant. My eyes closed.

"Take care of yourself," he breathed, cool against my skin.

There was a light, unnatural breeze. My eyes flashed open. The leaves on a small vine maple shuddered with the gentle wind of his passage.

He was gone.

With shaky legs, ignoring the fact that my action was useless, I followed him into the forest. The evidence of his path had disappeared instantly. There were no

footprints, the leaves were still again, but I walked forward without thinking. I could not do anything else. I had to keep moving. If I stopped looking for him, it was over.

Love, life, meaning…over.

I walked and walked. Time made no sense as I pushed slowly through the thick undergrowth. It was hours passing, but also only seconds. Maybe it felt like time had frozen because the forest looked the same no matter how far I went. I started to worry that I was traveling in a circle, a very small circle at that, but I kept going. I stumbled often, and, as it grew darker and darker, I fell often, too.

Finally, I tripped over something—it was black now, I had no idea what caught my foot—and I stayed down. I rolled onto my side, so that I could breathe, and curled up on the wet bracken.

As I lay there, I had a feeling that more time was passing than I realized. I couldn't remember how long it had been since nightfall. Was it always so dark here at night? Surely, as a rule, some little bit of moonlight would filter down through the clouds, through the chinks in the canopy of trees, and find the ground.

Not tonight. Tonight the sky was utterly black. Perhaps there was no moon tonight—a lunar eclipse, a new moon.

A new moon. I shivered, though I wasn't cold.

It was black for a long time before I heard them calling.

Someone was shouting my name. It was muted, muffled by the wet growth that surrounded me, but it

was definitely my name. I didn't recognize the voice. I thought about answering, but I was dazed, and it took a long time to come to the conclusion that I should answer. By then, the calling had stopped.

Sometime later, the rain woke me up. I don't think I'd really fallen asleep; I was just lost in an unthinking stupor, holding with all my strength to the numbness that kept me from realizing what I didn't want to know.

The rain bothered me a little. It was cold. I unwrapped my arms from around my legs to cover my face.

It was then that I heard the calling again. It was farther away this time, and sometimes it sounded like several voices were calling at once. I tried to breathe deeply. I remembered that I should answer, but I didn't think they would be able to hear me. Would I be able to shout loud enough?

Suddenly, there was another sound, startlingly close. A kind of snuffling, an animal sound. It sounded big. I wondered if I should feel afraid. I didn't—just numb. It didn't matter. The snuffling went away.

The rain continued, and I could feel the water pooling up against my cheek. I was trying to gather the strength to turn my head when I saw the light.

At first it was just a dim glow reflecting off the bushes in the distance. It grew brighter and brighter, illuminating a large space unlike the focused beam of a flashlight. The light broke through the closest brush, and I could see that it was a propane lantern, but that was all I could see—the brightness blinded me for a moment.

"Bella."

The voice was deep and unfamiliar, but full of recognition. He wasn't calling my name to search, he was acknowledging that I was found.

I stared up—impossibly high it seemed—at the dark face that I could now see above me. I was vaguely aware that the stranger probably only looked so tall because my head was still on the ground.

"Have you been hurt?"

I knew the words meant something, but I could only stare, bewildered. How could the meaning matter at this point?

"Bella, my name is Sam Uley."

There was nothing familiar about his name.

"Charlie sent me to look for you."

Charlie? That struck a chord, and I tried to pay more attention to what he was saying. Charlie mattered, if nothing else did.

The tall man held out a hand. I gazed at it, not sure what I was supposed to do.

His black eyes appraised me for a second, and then he shrugged. In a quick and supple motion, he pulled me up from the ground and into his arms.

I hung there, limp, as he loped swiftly through the wet forest. Some part of me knew this should upset me—being carried away by a stranger. But there was nothing left in me to upset.

It didn't seem like too much time passed before there were lights and the deep babble of many male voices. Sam Uley slowed as he approached the commotion.

"I've got her!" he called in a booming voice.

The babble ceased, and then picked up again with more intensity. A confusing swirl of faces moved over me. Sam's voice was the only one that made sense in the chaos, perhaps because my ear was against his chest.

"No, I don't think she's hurt," he told someone. "She just keeps saying 'He's gone.'"

Was I saying that out loud? I bit down on my lip.

"Bella, honey, are you all right?"

That was one voice I would know anywhere—even distorted, as it was now, with worry.

"Charlie?" My voice sounded strange and small.

"I'm right here, baby."

There was a shifting under me, followed by the leathery smell of my dad's sheriff jacket. Charlie staggered under my weight.

"Maybe I should hold on to her," Sam Uley suggested.

"I've got her," Charlie said, a little breathless.

He walked slowly, struggling. I wished I could tell him to put me down and let me walk, but I couldn't find my voice.

There were lights everywhere, held by the crowd walking with him. It felt like a parade. Or a funeral procession. I closed my eyes.

“We’re almost home now, honey,” Charlie mumbled now and then.

I opened my eyes again when I heard the door unlock. We were on the porch of our house, and the tall dark man named Sam was holding the door for Charlie, one arm extended toward us, as if he was preparing to catch me when Charlie’s arms failed.

But Charlie managed to get me through the door and to the couch in the living room.

“Dad, I’m all wet,” I objected feebly.

“That doesn’t matter.” His voice was gruff. And then he was talking to someone else. “Blankets are in the cupboard at the top of the stairs.”

“Bella?” a new voice asked. I looked at the gray-haired man leaning over me, and recognition came after a few slow seconds.

“Dr. Gerandy?” I mumbled.

“That’s right, dear,” he said. “Are you hurt, Bella?”

It took me a minute to think that through. I was confused by the memory of Sam Uley’s similar question in the woods. Only Sam had asked something else: Have you been hurt? he’d said. The difference seemed significant somehow.

Dr. Gerandy was waiting. One grizzled eyebrow rose, and the wrinkles on his forehead deepened.

“I’m not hurt,” I lied. The words were true enough for what he’d asked.

His warm hand touched my forehead, and his fingers pressed against the inside of my wrist. I watched his lips as he counted to himself, his eyes on his watch.

“What happened to you?” he asked casually.

I froze under his hand, tasting panic in the back of my throat.

“Did you get lost in the woods?” he prodded. I was aware of several other people listening. Three tall men with dark faces—from La Push, the Quileute Indian reservation down on the coastline, I guessed—Sam Uley among them, were standing very close together and staring at me. Mr. Newton was there with Mike and Mr. Weber, Angela’s father; they all were watching me more surreptitiously than the strangers. Other deep voices rumbled from the kitchen and outside the front door. Half the town must have been looking for me.

Charlie was the closest. He leaned in to hear my answer.

“Yes,” I whispered. “I got lost.”

The doctor nodded, thoughtful, his fingers probing gently against the glands under my jaw. Charlie’s face hardened.

“Do you feel tired?” Dr. Gerandy asked.

I nodded and closed my eyes obediently.

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with her,” I heard the doctor mutter to Charlie after a moment.

"Just exhaustion. Let her sleep it off, and I'll come check on her tomorrow," he paused. He must have looked at his watch, because he added, "Well, later today actually."

There was a creaking sound as they both pushed off from the couch to get to their feet.

"Is it true?" Charlie whispered. Their voices were farther away now. I strained to hear. "Did they leave?"

"Dr. Cullen asked us not to say anything," Dr. Gerandy answered. "The offer was very sudden; they had to choose immediately. Carlisle didn't want to make a big production out of leaving."

"A little warning might have been nice," Charlie grumbled.

Dr. Gerandy sounded uncomfortable when he replied. "Yes, well, in this situation, some warning might have been called for."

I didn't want to listen anymore. I felt around for the edge of the quilt someone had laid on top of me, and pulled it over my ear.

I drifted in and out of alertness. I heard Charlie whisper thanks to the volunteers as, one by one, they left. I felt his fingers on my forehead, and then the weight of another blanket. The phone rang a few times, and he hurried to catch it before it could wake me. He muttered reassurances in a low voice to the callers.

"Yeah, we found her. She's okay. She got lost. She's fine now," he said again and again.

I heard the springs in the armchair groan when he settled himself in for the night.

A few minutes later, the phone rang again.

Charlie moaned as he struggled to his feet, and then he rushed, stumbling, to the kitchen. I pulled my head deeper under the blankets, not wanting to listen to the same conversation again.

“Yeah,” Charlie said, and yawned.

His voice changed, it was much more alert when he spoke again. “Where?” There was a pause. “You’re sure it’s outside the reservation?” Another short pause. “But what could be burning out there?” He sounded both worried and mystified. “Look, I’ll call down there and check it out.”

I listened with more interest as he punched in a number.

“Hey, Billy, it’s Charlie—sorry I’m calling so early…no, she’s fine. She’s sleeping….Thanks, but that’s not why I called. I just got a call from Mrs. Stanley, and she says that from her second-story window she can see fires out on the sea cliffs, but I didn’t really….Oh!” Suddenly there was an edge in his voice—irritation…or anger. “And why are they doing that? Uh huh. Really?” He said it sarcastically. “Well, don’t apologize to me. Yeah, yeah. Just make sure the flames don’t spread….I know, I know, I’m surprised they got them lit at all in this weather.”

Charlie hesitated, and then added grudgingly. “Thanks for sending Sam and the other boys up. You were right—they do know the forest better than we do. It was Sam who found her, so I owe you

one….Yeah, I'll talk to you later," he agreed, still sour, before hanging up.

Charlie muttered something incoherent as he shuffled back to the living room.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

He hurried to my side.

"I'm sorry I woke you, honey."

"Is something burning?"

"It's nothing," he assured me. "Just some bonfires out on the cliffs."

"Bonfires?" I asked. My voice didn't sound curious. It sounded dead.

Charlie frowned. "Some of the kids from the reservation being rowdy," he explained.

"Why?" I wondered dully.

I could tell he didn't want to answer. He looked at the floor under his knees. "They're celebrating the news." His tone was bitter.

There was only one piece of news I could think of, try as I might not to. And then the pieces snapped together. "Because the Cullens left," I whispered. "They don't like the Cullens in La Push—I'd forgotten about that."

The Quileutes had their superstitions about the "cold ones," the blood-drinkers that were enemies to their tribe, just like they had their legends of the great flood and wolf-men ancestors. Just stories, folklore,

to most of them. Then there were the few that believed. Charlie's good friend Billy Black believed, though even Jacob, his own son, thought he was full of stupid superstitions. Billy had warned me to stay away from the Cullens....

The name stirred something inside me, something that began to claw its way toward the surface, something I knew I didn't want to face.

"It's ridiculous," Charlie spluttered.

We sat in silence for a moment. The sky was no longer black outside the window. Somewhere behind the rain, the sun was beginning to rise.

"Bella?" Charlie asked.

I looked at him uneasily.

"He left you alone in the woods?" Charlie guessed.

I deflected his question. "How did you know where to find me?" My mind shied away from the inevitable awareness that was coming, coming quickly now.

"Your note," Charlie answered, surprised. He reached into the back pocket of his jeans and pulled out a much-abused piece of paper. It was dirty and damp, with multiple creases from being opened and refolded many times. He unfolded it again, and held it up as evidence. The messy handwriting was remarkably close to my own.

Going for a walk with Edward, up the path, it said. Back soon, B.

"When you didn't come back, I called the Cullens, and no one answered," Charlie said in a low voice. "Then I

called the hospital, and Dr. Gerandy told me that Carlisle was gone."

"Where did they go?" I mumbled.

He stared at me. "Didn't Edward tell you?"

I shook my head, recoiling. The sound of his name unleashed the thing that was clawing inside of me—a pain that knocked me breathless, astonished me with its force.

Charlie eyed me doubtfully as he answered. "Carlisle took a job with a big hospital in Los Angeles. I guess they threw a lot of money at him."

Sunny L.A. The last place they would really go. I remembered my nightmare with the mirror…the bright sunlight shimmering off of his skin—

Agony ripped through me with the memory of his face.

"I want to know if Edward left you alone out there in the middle of the woods," Charlie insisted.

His name sent another wave of torture through me. I shook my head, frantic, desperate to escape the pain. "It was my fault. He left me right here on the trail, in sight of the house…but I tried to follow him."

Charlie started to say something; childishly, I covered my ears. "I can't talk about this anymore, Dad. I want to go to my room."

Before he could answer, I scrambled up from the couch and lurched my way up the stairs.

Someone had been in the house to leave a note for Charlie, a note that would lead him to find me. From the minute that I'd realized this, a horrible suspicion began to grow in my head. I rushed to my room, shutting and locking the door behind me before I ran to the CD player by my bed.

Everything looked exactly the same as I'd left it. I pressed down on the top of the CD player. The latch unhooked, and the lid slowly swung open.

It was empty.

The album Reneé had given me sat on the floor beside the bed, just where I'd put it last. I lifted the cover with a shaking hand.

I didn't have to flip any farther than the first page. The little metal corners no longer held a picture in place. The page was blank except for my own handwriting scrawled across the bottom: Edward Cullen, Charlie's kitchen, Sept. 13th.

I stopped there. I was sure that he would have been very thorough.

It will be as if I'd never existed, he'd promised me.

I felt the smooth wooden floor beneath my knees, and then the palms of my hands, and then it was pressed against the skin of my cheek. I hoped that I was fainting, but, to my disappointment, I didn't lose consciousness. The waves of pain that had only lapped at me before now reared high up and washed over my head, pulling me under.

I did not resurface.

OCTOBER

NOVEMBER

DECEMBER

JANUARY

# Chapter 4

## WAKING UP

Time passes, even when it seems impossible. Even when each tick of the second hand aches like the pulse of blood behind a bruise. It passes unevenly, in strange lurches and dragging lulls, but pass it does. Even for me.

Charlie's fist came down on the table. “THAT’S IT, Bella! I’m sending you home.”

I looked up from my cereal, which I was pondering rather than eating, and stared at Charlie in shock. I hadn’t been following the conversation—actually, I hadn’t been aware that we were having a conversation—and I wasn’t sure what he meant.

“I am home,” I mumbled, confused.

“I’m sending you to Reneé, to Jacksonville,” he clarified.

Charlie watched with exasperation as I slowly grasped the meaning of his words.

“What did I do?” I felt my face crumple. It was so unfair. My behavior had been above reproach for the past four months. After that first week, which neither of us ever mentioned, I hadn’t missed a day of school or work. My grades were perfect. I never broke curfew—I never went anywhere from which to break curfew in the first place. I only very rarely served leftovers.

Charlie was scowling.

"You didn't do anything. That's the problem. You never do anything."

"You want me to get into trouble?" I wondered, my eyebrows pulling together in mystification. I made an effort to pay attention. It wasn't easy. I was so used to tuning everything out, my ears felt stopped up.

"Trouble would be better than this…this moping around all the time!"

That stung a bit. I'd been careful to avoid all forms of moroseness, moping included.

"I am not moping around."

"Wrong word," he grudgingly conceded. "Moping would be better—that would be doing something. You're just…lifeless, Bella. I think that's the word I want."

This accusation struck home. I sighed and tried to put some animation into my response.

"I'm sorry, Dad." My apology sounded a little flat, even to me. I'd thought I'd been fooling him. Keeping Charlie from suffering was the whole point of all this effort. How depressing to think that the effort had been wasted.

"I don't want you to apologize."

I sighed. "Then tell me what you do want me to do."

"Bella," he hesitated, scrutinizing my reaction to his next words. "Honey, you're not the first person to go through this kind of thing, you know."

"I know that." My accompanying grimace was limp and unimpressive.

"Listen, honey. I think that—that maybe you need some help."

"Help?"

He paused, searching for the words again. "When your mother left," he began, frowning, "and took you with her." He inhaled deeply. "Well, that was a really bad time for me."

"I know, Dad," I mumbled.

"But I handled it," he pointed out. "Honey, you're not handling it. I waited, I hoped it would get better." He stared at me and I looked down quickly. "I think we both know it's not getting better."

"I'm fine."

He ignored me. "Maybe, well, maybe if you talked to someone about it. A professional."

"You want me to see a shrink?" My voice was a shade sharper as I realized what he was getting at.

"Maybe it would help."

"And maybe it wouldn't help one little bit."

I didn't know much about psychoanalysis, but I was pretty sure that it didn't work unless the subject was relatively honest. Sure, I could tell the truth—if I wanted to spend the rest of my life in a padded cell.

He examined my obstinate expression, and switched to another line of attack.

"It's beyond me, Bella. Maybe your mother—"

"Look," I said in a flat voice. "I'll go out tonight, if you want. I'll call Jess or Angela."

"That's not what I want," he argued, frustrated. "I don't think I can live through seeing you try harder. I've never seen anyone trying so hard. It hurts to watch."

I pretended to be dense, looking down at the table. "I don't understand, Dad. First you're mad because I'm not doing anything, and then you say you don't want me to go out."

"I want you to be happy—no, not even that much. I just want you not to be miserable. I think you'll have a better chance if you get out of Forks."

My eyes flashed up with the first small spark of feeling I'd had in too long to contemplate.

"I'm not leaving," I said.

"Why not?" he demanded.

"I'm in my last semester of school—it would screw everything up."

"You're a good student—you'll figure it out."

"I don't want to crowd Mom and Phil."

"Your mother's been dying to have you back."

"Florida is too hot."

His fist came down on the table again. "We both know what's really going on here, Bella, and it's not good for

you." He took a deep breath. "It's been months. No calls, no letters, no contact. You can't keep waiting for him."

I glowered at him. The heat almost, but not quite, reached my face. It had been a long time since I'd blushed with any emotion.

This whole subject was utterly forbidden, as he was well aware.

"I'm not waiting for anything. I don't expect anything," I said in a low monotone.

"Bella—," Charlie began, his voice thick.

"I have to get to school," I interrupted, standing up and yanking my untouched breakfast from the table. I dumped my bowl in the sink without pausing to wash it out. I couldn't deal with any more conversation.

"I'll make plans with Jessica," I called over my shoulder as I strapped on my school bag, not meeting his eyes. "Maybe I won't be home for dinner. We'll go to Port Angeles and watch a movie."

I was out the front door before he could react.

In my haste to get away from Charlie, I ended up being one of the first ones to school. The plus side was that I got a really good parking spot. The downside was that I had free time on my hands, and I tried to avoid free time at all costs.

Quickly, before I could start thinking about Charlie's accusations, I pulled out my Calculus book. I flipped it open to the section we should be starting today, and tried to make sense of it. Reading math was even worse than listening to it, but I was getting better at

it. In the last several months, I'd spent ten times the amount of time on Calculus than I'd ever spent on math before. As a result, I was managing to keep in the range of a low A. I knew Mr. Varner felt my improvement was all due to his superior teaching methods. And if that made him happy, I wasn't going to burst his bubble.

I forced myself to keep at it until the parking lot was full, and I ended up rushing to English. We were working on Animal Farm, an easy subject matter. I didn't mind communism; it was a welcome change from the exhausting romances that made up most of the curriculum. I settled into my seat, pleased by the distraction of Mr. Berty's lecture.

Time moved easily while I was in school. The bell rang all too soon. I started repacking my bag.

"Bella?"

I recognized Mike's voice, and I knew what his next words would be before he said them.

"Are you working tomorrow?"

I looked up. He was leaning across the aisle with an anxious expression. Every Friday he asked me the same question. Never mind that I hadn't taken so much as a sick day. Well, with one exception, months ago. But he had no reason to look at me with such concern. I was a model employee.

"Tomorrow is Saturday, isn't it?" I said. Having just had it pointed out to me by Charlie, I realized how lifeless my voice really sounded.

“Yeah, it is,” he agreed. “See you in Spanish.” He waved once before turning his back. He didn’t bother walking me to class anymore.

I trudged off to Calculus with a grim expression. This was the class where I sat next to Jessica.

It had been weeks, maybe months, since Jess had even greeted me when I passed her in the hall. I knew I had offended her with my antisocial behavior, and she was sulking. It wasn’t going to be easy to talk to her now—especially to ask her to do me a favor. I weighed my options carefully as I loitered outside the classroom, procrastinating.

I wasn’t about to face Charlie again without some kind of social interaction to report. I knew I couldn’t lie, though the thought of driving to Port Angeles and back alone—being sure my odometer reflected the correct mileage, just in case he checked—was very tempting. Jessica’s mom was the biggest gossip in town, and Charlie was bound to run into Mrs. Stanley sooner rather than later. When he did, he would no doubt mention the trip. Lying was out.

With a sigh, I shoved the door open.

Mr. Varner gave me a dark look—he’d already started the lecture. I hurried to my seat. Jessica didn’t look up as I sat next to her. I was glad that I had fifty minutes to mentally prepare myself.

This class flew by even faster than English. A small part of that speed was due to my goody-goody preparation this morning in the truck—but mostly it stemmed from the fact that time always sped up when I was looking forward to something unpleasant.

I grimaced when Mr. Varner dismissed the class five minutes early. He smiled like he was being nice.

"Jess?" My nose wrinkled as I cringed, waiting for her to turn on me.

She twisted in her seat to face me, eyeing me incredulously. "Are you talking to me, Bella?"

"Of course." I widened my eyes to suggest innocence.

"What? Do you need help with Calculus?" Her tone was a tad sour.

"No." I shook my head. "Actually, I wanted to know if you would…go to the movies with me tonight? I really need a girls' night out." The words sounded stiff, like badly delivered lines, and she looked suspicious.

"Why are you asking me?" she asked, still unfriendly.

"You're the first person I think of when I want girl time." I smiled, and I hoped the smile looked genuine. It was probably true. She was at least the first person I thought of when I wanted to avoid Charlie. It amounted to the same thing.

She seemed a little mollified. "Well, I don't know."

"Do you have plans?"

"No…I guess I can go with you. What do you want to see?"

"I'm not sure what's playing," I hedged. This was the tricky part. I racked my brain for a clue—hadn't I heard someone talk about a movie recently? Seen a poster? "How about that one with the female president?"

She looked at me oddly. “Bella, that one’s been out of the theater forever.”

“Oh.” I frowned. “Is there anything you’d like to see?”

Jessica’s natural bubbliness started to leak out in spite of herself as she thought out loud. “Well, there’s that new romantic comedy that’s getting great reviews. I want to see that one. And my dad just saw Dead End and he really liked it.”

I grasped at the promising title. “What’s that one about?”

“Zombies or something. He said it was the scariest thing he’d seen in years.”

“That sounds perfect.” I’d rather deal with real zombies than watch a romance.

“Okay.” She seemed surprised by my response. I tried to remember if I liked scary movies, but I wasn’t sure. “Do you want me to pick you up after school?” she offered.

“Sure.”

Jessica smiled at me with tentative friendliness before she left. My answering smile was just a little late, but I thought that she saw it.

The rest of the day passed quickly, my thoughts focused on planning for tonight. I knew from experience that once I got Jessica talking, I would be able to get away with a few mumbled responses at the appropriate moments. Only minimal interaction would be required.

The thick haze that blurred my days now was sometimes confusing. I was surprised when I found myself in my room, not clearly remembering the drive home from school or even opening the front door. But that didn't matter. Losing track of time was the most I asked from life.

I didn't fight the haze as I turned to my closet. The numbness was more essential in some places than in others. I barely registered what I was looking at as I slid the door aside to reveal the pile of rubbish on the left side of my closet, under the clothes I never wore.

My eyes did not stray toward the black garbage bag that held my present from that last birthday, did not see the shape of the stereo where it strained against the black plastic; I didn't think of the bloody mess my nails had been when I'd finished clawing it out of the dashboard.

I yanked the old purse I rarely used off the nail it hung from, and shoved the door shut.

Just then I heard a horn honking. I swiftly traded my wallet from my schoolbag into the purse. I was in a hurry, as if rushing would somehow make the night pass more quickly.

I glanced at myself in the hall mirror before I opened the door, arranging my features carefully into a smile and trying to hold them there.

"Thanks for coming with me tonight," I told Jess as I climbed into the passenger seat, trying to infuse my tone with gratitude. It had been a while since I'd really thought about what I was saying to anyone besides Charlie. Jess was harder. I wasn't sure which were the right emotions to fake.

"Sure. So, what brought this on?" Jess wondered as she drove down my street.

"Brought what on?"

"Why did you suddenly decide…to go out?" It sounded like she changed her question halfway through.

I shrugged. "Just needed a change."

I recognized the song on the radio then, and quickly reached for the dial. "Do you mind?" I asked.

"No, go ahead."

I scanned through the stations until I found one that was harmless. I peeked at Jess's expression as the new music filled the car.

Her eyes squinted. "Since when do you listen to rap?"

"I don't know," I said. "A while."

"You like this?" she asked doubtfully.

"Sure."

It would be much too hard to interact with Jessica normally if I had to work to tune out the music, too. I nodded my head, hoping I was in time with the beat.

"Okay…." She stared out the windshield with wide eyes.

"So what's up with you and Mike these days?" I asked quickly.

"You see him more than I do."

The question hadn't started her talking like I'd hoped it would.

"It's hard to talk at work," I mumbled, and then I tried again. "Have you been out with anyone lately?"

"Not really. I go out with Conner sometimes. I went out with Eric two weeks ago." She rolled her eyes, and I sensed a long story. I clutched at the opportunity.

"Eric Yorkie? Who asked who?"

She groaned, getting more animated. "He did, of course! I couldn't think of a nice way to say no."

"Where did he take you?" I demanded, knowing she would interpret my eagerness as interest. "Tell me all about it."

She launched into her tale, and I settled into my seat, more comfortable now. I paid strict attention, murmuring in sympathy and gasping in horror as called for. When she was finished with her Eric story, she continued into a Conner comparison without any prodding.

The movie was playing early, so Jess thought we should hit the twilight showing and eat later. I was happy to go along with whatever she wanted; after all, I was getting what I wanted—Charlie off my back.

I kept Jess talking through the previews, so I could ignore them more easily. But I got nervous when the movie started. A young couple was walking along a beach, swinging hands and discussing their mutual affection with gooey falseness. I resisted the urge to cover my ears and start humming. I had not bargained for a romance.

"I thought we picked the zombie movie," I hissed to Jessica.

"This is the zombie movie."

"Then why isn't anyone getting eaten?" I asked desperately.

She looked at me with wide eyes that were almost alarmed. "I'm sure that part's coming," she whispered.

"I'm getting popcorn. Do you want any?"

"No, thanks."

Someone shushed us from behind.

I took my time at the concession counter, watching the clock and debating what percentage of a ninety-minute movie could be spent on romantic exposition. I decided ten minutes was more than enough, but I paused just inside the theater doors to be sure. I could hear horrified screams blaring from the speakers, so I knew I'd waited long enough.

"You missed everything," Jess murmured when I slid back into my seat. "Almost everyone is a zombie now."

"Long line." I offered her some popcorn. She took a handful.

The rest of the movie was comprised of gruesome zombie attacks and endless screaming from the handful of people left alive, their numbers dwindling quickly. I would have thought there was nothing in that to disturb me. But I felt uneasy, and I wasn't sure why at first.

It wasn't until almost the very end, as I watched a haggard zombie shambling after the last shrieking survivor, that I realized what the problem was. The scene kept cutting between the horrified face of the heroine, and the dead, emotionless face of her pursuer, back and forth as it closed the distance.

And I realized which one resembled me the most.

I stood up.

"Where are you going? There's, like, two minutes left," Jess hissed.

"I need a drink," I muttered as I raced for the exit.

I sat down on the bench outside the theater door and tried very hard not to think of the irony. But it was ironic, all things considered, that, in the end, I would wind up as a zombie. I hadn't seen that one coming.

Not that I hadn't dreamed of becoming a mythical monster once—just never a grotesque, animated corpse. I shook my head to dislodge that train of thought, feeling panicky. I couldn't afford to think about what I'd once dreamed of.

It was depressing to realize that I wasn't the heroine anymore, that my story was over.

Jessica came out of the theater doors and hesitated, probably wondering where the best place was to search for me. When she saw me, she looked relieved, but only for a moment. Then she looked irritated.

"Was the movie too scary for you?" she wondered.

"Yeah," I agreed. "I guess I'm just a coward."

“That’s funny.” She frowned. “I didn’t think you were scared—I was screaming all the time, but I didn’t hear you scream once. So I didn’t know why you left.”

I shrugged. “Just scared.”

She relaxed a little. “That was the scariest movie I think I’ve ever seen. I’ll bet we’re going to have nightmares tonight.”

“No doubt about that,” I said, trying to keep my voice normal. It was inevitable that I would have nightmares, but they wouldn’t be about zombies. Her eyes flashed to my face and away. Maybe I hadn’t succeeded with the normal voice.

“Where do you want to eat?” Jess asked.

“I don’t care.”

“Okay.”

Jess started talking about the male lead in the movie as we walked. I nodded as she gushed over his hotness, unable to remember seeing a non-zombie man at all.

I didn’t watch where Jessica was leading me. I was only vaguely aware that it was dark and quieter now. It took me longer than it should have to realize why it was quiet. Jessica had stopped babbling. I looked at her apologetically, hoping I hadn’t hurt her feelings.

Jessica wasn’t looking at me. Her face was tense; she stared straight ahead and walked fast. As I watched, her eyes darted quickly to the right, across the road, and back again.

I glanced around myself for the first time.

We were on a short stretch of unlit sidewalk. The little shops lining the street were all locked up for the night, windows black. Half a block ahead, the streetlights started up again, and I could see, farther down, the bright golden arches of the McDonald's she was heading for.

Across the street there was one open business. The windows were covered from inside and there were neon signs, advertisements for different brands of beer, glowing in front of them. The biggest sign, in brilliant green, was the name of the bar—One-Eyed Pete's. I wondered if there was some pirate theme not visible from outside. The metal door was propped open; it was dimly lit inside, and the low murmur of many voices and the sound of ice clinking in glasses floated across the street. Lounging against the wall beside the door were four men.

I glanced back at Jessica. Her eyes were fixed on the path ahead and she moved briskly. She didn't look frightened—just wary, trying to not attract attention to herself.

I paused without thinking, looking back at the four men with a strong sense of déjà vu. This was a different road, a different night, but the scene was so much the same. One of them was even short and dark. As I stopped and turned toward them, that one looked up in interest.

I stared back at him, frozen on the sidewalk.

"Bella?" Jess whispered. "What are you doing?"

I shook my head, not sure myself. "I think I know them…," I muttered.

What was I doing? I should be running from this memory as fast as I could, blocking the image of the four lounging men from my mind, protecting myself with the numbness I couldn't function without. Why was I stepping, dazed, into the street?

It seemed too coincidental that I should be in Port Angeles with Jessica, on a dark street even. My eyes focused on the short one, trying to match the features to my memory of the man who had threatened me that night almost a year ago. I wondered if there was any way I would recognize the man, if it was really him. That particular part of that particular evening was just a blur. My body remembered it better than my mind did; the tension in my legs as I tried to decide whether to run or to stand my ground, the dryness in my throat as I struggled to build a decent scream, the tight stretch of skin across my knuckles as I clenched my hands into fists, the chills on the back of my neck when the dark-haired man called me "sugar."...

There was an indefinite, implied kind of menace to these men that had nothing to do with that other night. It sprung from the fact that they were strangers, and it was dark here, and they outnumbered us—nothing more specific than that. But it was enough that Jessica's voice cracked in panic as she called after me.

"Bella, come on!"

I ignored her, walking slowly forward without ever making the conscious decision to move my feet. I didn't understand why, but the nebulous threat the men presented drew me toward them. It was a senseless impulse, but I hadn't felt any kind of impulse in so long....I followed it.

Something unfamiliar beat through my veins. Adrenaline, I realized, long absent from my system, drumming my pulse faster and fighting against the lack of sensation. It was strange—why the adrenaline when there was no fear? It was almost as if it were an echo of the last time I'd stood like this, on a dark street in Port Angeles with strangers.

I saw no reason for fear. I couldn't imagine anything in the world that there was left to be afraid of, not physically at least. One of the few advantages of losing everything.

I was halfway across the street when Jess caught up to me and grabbed my arm.

"Bella! You can't go in a bar!" she hissed.

"I'm not going in," I said absently, shaking her hand off. "I just want to see something…."

"Are you crazy?" she whispered. "Are you suicidal?"

That question caught my attention, and my eyes focused on her.

"No, I'm not." My voice sounded defensive, but it was true. I wasn't suicidal. Even in the beginning, when death unquestionably would have been a relief, I didn't consider it. I owed too much to Charlie. I felt too responsible for Reneé. I had to think of them.

And I'd made a promise not to do anything stupid or reckless. For all those reasons, I was still breathing.

Remembering that promise, I felt a twinge of guilt, but what I was doing right now didn't really count. It wasn't like I was taking a blade to my wrists.

Jess's eyes were round, her mouth hung open. Her question about suicide had been rhetorical, I realized too late.

"Go eat," I encouraged her, waving toward the fast food. I didn't like the way she looked at me. "I'll catch up in a minute."

I turned away from her, back to the men who were watching us with amused, curious eyes.

"Bella, stop this right now!"

My muscles locked into place, froze me where I stood. Because it wasn't Jessica's voice that rebuked me now. It was a furious voice, a familiar voice, a beautiful voice—soft like velvet even though it was irate.

It was his voice—I was exceptionally careful not to think his name—and I was surprised that the sound of it did not knock me to my knees, did not curl me onto the pavement in a torture of loss. But there was no pain, none at all.

In the instant that I heard his voice, everything was very clear. Like my head had suddenly surfaced out of some dark pool. I was more aware of everything—sight, sound, the feel of the cold air that I hadn't noticed was blowing sharply against my face, the smells coming from the open bar door.

I looked around myself in shock.

"Go back to Jessica," the lovely voice ordered, still angry. "You promised—nothing stupid."

I was alone. Jessica stood a few feet from me, staring at me with frightened eyes. Against the wall, the

strangers watched, confused, wondering what I was doing, standing there motionless in the middle of the street.

I shook my head, trying to understand. I knew he wasn't there, and yet, he felt improbably close, close for the first time since…since the end. The anger in his voice was concern, the same anger that was once very familiar—something I hadn't heard in what felt like a lifetime.

"Keep your promise." The voice was slipping away, as if the volume was being turned down on a radio.

I began to suspect that I was having some kind of hallucination. Triggered, no doubt, by the memory—the déjà vu, the strange familiarity of the situation.

I ran through the possibilities quickly in my head.

Option one: I was crazy. That was the layman's term for people who heard voices in their heads.

Possible.

Option two: My subconscious mind was giving me what it thought I wanted. This was wish fulfillment—a momentary relief from pain by embracing the incorrect idea that he cared whether I lived or died. Projecting what he would have said if A) he were here, and B) he would be in any way bothered by something bad happening to me.

Probable.

I could see no option three, so I hoped it was the second option and this was just my subconscious running amuck, rather than something I would need to be hospitalized for.

My reaction was hardly sane, though—I was grateful. The sound of his voice was something that I'd feared I was losing, and so, more than anything else, I felt overwhelming gratitude that my unconscious mind had held onto that sound better than my conscious one had.

I was not allowed to think of him. That was something I tried to be very strict about. Of course I slipped; I was only human. But I was getting better, and so the pain was something I could avoid for days at a time now. The trade-off was the never-ending numbness. Between pain and nothing, I'd chosen nothing.

I waited for the pain now. I was not numb—my senses felt unusually intense after so many months of the haze—but the normal pain held off. The only ache was the disappointment that his voice was fading.

There was a second of choice.

The wise thing would be to run away from this potentially destructive—and certainly mentally unstable—development. It would be stupid to encourage hallucinations.

But his voice was fading.

I took another step forward, testing.

"Bella, turn around," he growled.

I sighed in relief. The anger was what I wanted to hear—false, fabricated evidence that he cared, a dubious gift from my subconscious.

Very few seconds had passed while I sorted this all out. My little audience watched, curious. It probably looked like I was just dithering over whether or not I

was going to approach them. How could they guess that I was standing there enjoying an unexpected moment of insanity?

“Hi,” one of the men called, his tone both confident and a bit sarcastic. He was fair-skinned and fair-haired, and he stood with the assurance of someone who thought of himself as quite good-looking. I couldn’t tell whether he was or not. I was prejudiced.

The voice in my head answered with an exquisite snarl. I smiled, and the confident man seemed to take that as encouragement.

“Can I help you with something? You look lost.” He grinned and winked.

I stepped carefully over the gutter, running with water that was black in the darkness.

“No. I’m not lost.”

Now that I was closer—and my eyes felt oddly in focus—I analyzed the short, dark man’s face. It was not familiar in any way. I suffered a curious sensation of disappointment that this was not the terrible man who had tried to hurt me almost a year ago.

The voice in my head was quiet now.

The short man noticed my stare. “Can I buy you a drink?” he offered, nervous, seeming flattered that I’d singled him out to stare at.

“I’m too young,” I answered automatically.

He was baffled—wondering why I had approached them. I felt compelled to explain.

"From across the street, you looked like someone I knew. Sorry, my mistake."

The threat that had pulled me across the street had evaporated. These were not the dangerous men I remembered. They were probably nice guys. Safe. I lost interest.

"That's okay," the confident blonde said. "Stay and hang out with us."

"Thanks, but I can't." Jessica was hesitating in the middle of the street, her eyes wide with outrage and betrayal.

"Oh, just a few minutes."

I shook my head, and turned to rejoin Jessica.

"Let's go eat," I suggested, barely glancing at her. Though I appeared to be, for the moment, freed of the zombie abstraction, I was just as distant. My mind was preoccupied. The safe, numb deadness did not come back, and I got more anxious with every minute that passed without its return.

"What were you thinking?" Jessica snapped. "You don't know them—they could have been psychopaths!"

I shrugged, wishing she would let it go. "I just thought I knew the one guy."

"You are so odd, Bella Swan. I feel like I don't know who you are."

"Sorry." I didn't know what else to say to that.

We walked to McDonald's in silence. I'd bet that she was wishing we'd taken her car instead of walking the short distance from the theater, so that she could use the drive-through. She was just as anxious now for this evening to be over as I had been from the beginning.

I tried to start a conversation a few times while we ate, but Jessica was not cooperative. I must have really offended her.

When we go back in the car, she tuned the stereo back to her favorite station and turned the volume too loud to allow easy conversation.

I didn't have to struggle as hard as usual to ignore the music. Even though my mind, for once, was not carefully numb and empty, I had too much to think about to hear the lyrics.

I waited for the numbness to return, or the pain. Because the pain must be coming. I'd broken my personal rules. Instead of shying away from the memories, I'd walked forward and greeted them. I'd heard his voice, so clearly, in my head. That was going to cost me, I was sure of it. Especially if I couldn't reclaim the haze to protect myself. I felt too alert, and that frightened me.

But relief was still the strongest emotion in my body—relief that came from the very core of my being.

As much as I struggled not to think of him, I did not struggle to forget. I worried—late in the night, when the exhaustion of sleep deprivation broke down my defenses—that it was all slipping away. That my mind was a sieve, and I would someday not be able to remember the precise color of his eyes, the feel of his

cool skin, or the texture of his voice. I could not think of them, but I must remember them.

Because there was just one thing that I had to believe to be able to live—I had to know that he existed. That was all. Everything else I could endure. So long as he existed.

That's why I was more trapped in Forks than I ever had been before, why I'd fought with Charlie when he suggested a change. Honestly, it shouldn't matter; no one was ever coming back here.

But if I were to go to Jacksonville, or anywhere else bright and unfamiliar, how could I be sure he was real? In a place where I could never imagine him, the conviction might fade…and that I could not live through.

Forbidden to remember, terrified to forget; it was a hard line to walk.

I was surprised when Jessica stopped the car in front of my house. The ride had not taken long, but, short as it seemed, I wouldn't have thought that Jessica could go that long without speaking.

"Thanks for going out with me, Jess," I said as I opened my door. "That was. . .fun." I hoped that fun was the appropriate word.

"Sure," she muttered.

"I'm sorry about…after the movie."

"Whatever, Bella." She glared out the windshield instead of looking at me. She seemed to be growing angrier rather than getting over it.

"See you Monday?"

"Yeah. Bye."

I gave up and shut the door. She drove away, still without looking at me.

I'd forgotten her by the time I was inside.

Charlie was waiting for me in the middle of the hall, his arms folded tight over his chest with his hands balled into fists.

"Hey, Dad," I said absentmindedly as I ducked around Charlie, heading for the stairs. I'd been thinking about him for too long, and I wanted to be upstairs before it caught up with me.

"Where have you been?" Charlie demanded.

I looked at my dad, surprised. "I went to a movie in Port Angeles with Jessica. Like I told you this morning."

"Humph," he grunted.

"Is that okay?"

He studied my face, his eyes widening as if he saw something unexpected. "Yeah, that's fine. Did you have fun?"

"Sure," I said. "We watched zombies eat people. It was great."

His eyes narrowed.

"'Night, Dad."

He let me pass. I hurried to my room.

I lay in my bed a few minutes later, resigned as the pain finally made its appearance.

It was a crippling thing, this sensation that a huge hole had been punched through my chest, excising my most vital organs and leaving ragged, unhealed gashes around the edges that continued to throb and bleed despite the passage of time. Rationally, I knew my lungs must still be intact, yet I gasped for air and my head spun like my efforts yielded me nothing. My heart must have been beating, too, but I couldn't hear the sound of my pulse in my ears; my hands felt blue with cold. I curled inward, hugging my ribs to hold myself together. I scrambled for my numbness, my denial, but it evaded me.

And yet, I found I could survive. I was alert, I felt the pain—the aching loss that radiated out from my chest, sending wracking waves of hurt through my limbs and head—but it was manageable. I could live through it. It didn't feel like the pain had weakened over time, rather that I'd grown strong enough to bear it.

Whatever it was that had happened tonight—and whether it was the zombies, the adrenaline, or the hallucinations that were responsible—it had woken me up.

For the first time in a long time, I didn't know what to expect in the morning.

# Chapter 5

## CHEATER

“Bella, why don't you take off,” Mike suggested, his eyes focused off to the side, not really looking at me. I wondered how long that had been going on without me noticing.

It was a slow afternoon at Newton’s. At the moment there were only two patrons in the store, dedicated backpackers from the sound of their conversation. Mike had spent the last hour going through the pros and cons of two brands of lightweight packs with them. But they’d taken a break from serious pricing to indulge in trying to one-up each other with their latest tales from the trail. Their distraction had given Mike a chance to escape.

“I don’t mind staying,” I said. I still hadn’t been able to sink back into my protective shell of numbness, and everything seemed oddly close and loud today, like I’d taken cotton out of my ears. I tried to tune out the laughing hikers without success.

“I’m telling you,” said the thickset man with the orange beard that didn’t match his dark brown hair. “I’ve seen grizzlies pretty close up in Yellowstone, but they had nothing on this brute.” His hair was matted, and his clothes looked like they’d been on his back for more than a few days. Fresh from the mountains.

“Not a chance. Black bears don’t get that big. The grizzlies you saw were probably cubs.” The second man was tall and lean, his face tanned and wind-whipped into an impressive leathery crust.

"Seriously, Bella, as soon as these two give up, I'm closing the place down," Mike murmured.

"If you want me to go. . ." I shrugged.

"On all fours it was taller than you," the bearded man insisted while I gathered my things together. "Big as a house and pitch-black. I'm going to report it to the ranger here. People ought to be warned—this wasn't up on the mountain, mind you—this was only a few miles from the trailhead."

Leather-face laughed and rolled his eyes. "Let me guess—you were on your way in? Hadn't eaten real food or slept off the ground in a week, right?"

"Hey, uh, Mike, right?" the bearded man called, looking toward us.

"See you Monday," I mumbled.

"Yes, sir," Mike replied, turning away.

"Say, have there been any warnings around here recently—about black bears?"

"No, sir. But it's always good to keep your distance and store your food correctly. Have you seen the new bear-safe canisters? They only weigh two pounds . . ."

The doors slid open to let me out into the rain. I hunched over inside my jacket as I dashed for my truck. The rain hammering against my hood sounded unusually loud, too, but soon the roar of the engine drowned out everything else.

I didn't want to go back to Charlie's empty house. Last night had been particularly brutal, and I had no desire to revisit the scene of the suffering. Even after

the pain had subsided enough for me to sleep, it wasn't over. Like I'd told Jessica after the movie, there was never any doubt that I would have nightmares.

I always had nightmares now, every night. Not nightmares really, not in the plural, because it was always the same nightmare. You'd think I'd get bored after so many months, grow immune to it. But the dream never failed to horrify me, and only ended when I woke myself with screaming. Charlie didn't come in to see what was wrong anymore, to make sure there was no intruder strangling me or something like that—he was used to it now.

My nightmare probably wouldn't even frighten someone else. Nothing jumped out and screamed, "Boo!" There were no zombies, no ghosts, no psychopaths. There was nothing, really. Only nothing. Just the endless maze of moss-covered trees, so quiet that the silence was an uncomfortable pressure against my eardrums. It was dark, like dusk on a cloudy day, with only enough light to see that there was nothing to see. I hurried through the gloom without a path, always searching, searching, searching, getting more frantic as the time stretched on, trying to move faster, though the speed made me clumsy….Then there would come the point in my dream—and I could feel it coming now, but could never seem to wake myself up before it hit—when I couldn't remember what it was that I was searching for. When I realized that there was nothing to search for, and nothing to find. That there never had been anything more than just this empty, dreary wood, and there never would be anything more for me…nothing but nothing….

That was usually about when the screaming started.

I wasn't paying attention to where I was driving—just wandering through empty, wet side roads as I avoided the ways that would take me home—because I didn't have anywhere to go.

I wished I could feel numb again, but I couldn't remember how I'd managed it before. The nightmare was nagging at my mind and making me think about things that would cause me pain. I didn't want to remember the forest. Even as I shuddered away from the images, I felt my eyes fill with tears and the aching begin around the edges of the hole in my chest. I took one hand from the steering wheel and wrapped it around my torso to hold it in one piece.

It will be as if I'd never existed. The words ran through my head, lacking the perfect clarity of my hallucination last night. They were just words, soundless, like print on a page. Just words, but they ripped the hole wide open, and I stomped on the brake, knowing I should not drive while this incapacitated.

I curled over, pressing my face against the steering wheel and trying to breathe without lungs.

I wondered how long this could last. Maybe someday, years from now—if the pain would just decrease to the point where I could bear it—I would be able to look back on those few short months that would always be the best of my life. And, if it were possible that the pain would ever soften enough to allow me to do that, I was sure that I would feel grateful for as much time as he'd given me. More than I'd asked for, more than I'd deserved. Maybe someday I'd be able to see it that way.

But what if this hole never got any better? If the raw edges never healed? If the damage was permanent and irreversible?

I held myself tightly together. As if he'd never existed, I thought in despair. What a stupid and impossible promise to make! He could steal my pictures and reclaim his gifts, but that didn't put things back the way they'd been before I'd met him. The physical evidence was the most insignificant part of the equation. I was changed, my insides altered almost past the point of recognition. Even my outsides looked different—my face sallow, white except for the purple circles the nightmares had left under my eyes. My eyes were dark enough against my pallid skin that—if I were beautiful, and seen from a distance—I might even pass for a vampire now. But I was not beautiful, and I probably looked closer to a zombie.

As if he'd never existed? That was insanity. It was a promise that he could never keep, a promise that was broken as soon as he'd made it.

I thumped my head against the steering wheel, trying to distract myself from the sharper pain.

It made me feel silly for ever worrying about keeping my promise. Where was the logic in sticking to an agreement that had already been violated by the other party? Who cared if I was reckless and stupid? There was no reason to avoid recklessness, no reason why I shouldn't get to be stupid.

I laughed humorlessly to myself, still gasping for air. Reckless in Forks—now there was a hopeless proposition.

The dark humor distracted me, and the distraction eased the pain. My breath came easier, and I was able

to lean back against the seat. Though it was cold today, my forehead was damp with sweat.

I concentrated on my hopeless proposition to keep from sliding back into the excruciating memories. To be reckless in Forks would take a lot of creativity—maybe more than I had. But I wished I could find some way….I might feel better if I weren't holding fast, all alone, to a broken pact. If I were an oath-breaker, too. But how could I cheat on my side of the deal, here in this harmless little town? Of course, Forks hadn't always been so harmless, but now it was exactly what it had always appeared to be. It was dull, it was safe.

I stared out the windshield for a long moment, my thoughts moving sluggishly—I couldn't seem to make those thoughts go anywhere. I cut the engine, which was groaning in a pitiful way after idling for so long, and stepped out into the drizzle.

The cold rain dripped through my hair and then trickled across my cheeks like freshwater tears. It helped to clear my head. I blinked the water from my eyes, staring blankly across the road.

After a minute of staring, I recognized where I was. I'd parked in the middle of the north lane of Russell Avenue. I was standing in front of the Cheneys' house—my truck was blocking their driveway—and across the road lived the Markses. I knew I needed to move my truck, and that I ought to go home. It was wrong to wander the way I had, distracted and impaired, a menace on the roads of Forks. Besides, someone would notice me soon enough, and report me to Charlie.

As I took a deep breath in preparation to move, a sign in the Markses' yard caught my eye—it was just a big

piece of cardboard leaning against their mailbox post, with black letters scrawled in caps across it.

Sometimes, kismet happens.

Coincidence? Or was it meant to be? I didn't know, but it seemed kind of silly to think that it was somehow fated, that the dilapidated motorcycles rusting in the Markses' front yard beside the hand-printed FOR SALE, AS IS sign were serving some higher purpose by existing there, right where I needed them to be.

So maybe it wasn't kismet. Maybe there were just all kinds of ways to be reckless, and I only now had my eyes open to them.

Reckless and stupid. Those were Charlie's two very favorite words to apply to motorcycles.

Charlie's job didn't get a lot of action compared to cops in bigger towns, but he did get called in on traffic accidents. With the long, wet stretches of freeway twisting and turning through the forest, blind corner after blind corner, there was no shortage of that kind of action. But even with all the huge log-haulers barreling around the turns, mostly people walked away. The exceptions to that rule were often on motorcycles, and Charlie had seen one too many victims, almost always kids, smeared on the highway. He'd made me promise before I was ten that I would never accept a ride on a motorcycle. Even at that age, I didn't have to think twice before promising. Who would want to ride a motorcycle here? It would be like taking a sixty-mile-per-hour bath.

So many promises I kept…

It clicked together for me then. I wanted to be stupid and reckless, and I wanted to break promises. Why stop at one?

That's as far as I thought it through. I sloshed through the rain to the Markses' front door and rang the bell.

One of the Marks boys opened the door, the younger one, the freshman. I couldn't remember his name. His sandy hair only came up to my shoulder.

He had no trouble remembering my name. "Bella Swan?" he asked in surprise.

"How much do you want for the bike?" I panted, jerking my thumb over my shoulder toward the sales display.

"Are you serious?" he demanded.

"Of course I am."

"They don't work."

I sighed impatiently—this was something I'd already inferred from the sign. "How much?"

"If you really want one, just take it. My mom made my dad move them down to the road so they'd get picked up with the garbage."

I glanced at the bikes again and saw that they were resting on a pile of yard clippings and dead branches. "Are you positive about that?"

"Sure, you want to ask her?"

It was probably better not to involve adults who might mention this to Charlie.

"No, I believe you."

"You want me to help you?" he offered. "They're not light."

"Okay, thanks. I only need one, though."

"Might as well take both," the boy said. "Maybe you could scavenge some parts."

He followed me out into the downpour and helped me load both of the heavy bikes into the back of my truck. He seemed eager to be rid of them, so I didn't argue.

"What are you going to do with them, anyway?" he asked. "They haven't worked in years."

"I kind of guessed that," I said, shrugging. My spur-of-the-moment whim hadn't come with a plan intact. "Maybe I'll take them to Dowling's."

He snorted. "Dowling would charge more to fix them than they'd be worth running."

I couldn't argue with that. John Dowling had earned a reputation for his pricing; no one went to him except in an emergency. Most people preferred to make the drive up to Port Angeles, if their car was able. I'd been very lucky on that front—I'd been worried, when Charlie first gifted me my ancient truck, that I wouldn't be able to afford to keep it running. But I'd never had a single problem with it, other than the screaming-loud engine and the fifty-five-mile-per-hour maximum speed limit. Jacob Black had kept it

in great shape when it had belonged to his father, Billy….

Inspiration hit like a bolt of lightning—not unreasonable, considering the storm. “You know what? That’s okay. I know someone who builds cars.”

“Oh. That’s good.” He smiled in relief.

He waved as I pulled away, still smiling. Friendly kid.

I drove quickly and purposefully now, in a hurry to get home before there was the slightest chance of Charlie appearing, even in the highly unlikely event that he might knock off early. I dashed through the house to the phone, keys still in hand.

“Chief Swan, please,” I said when the deputy answered. “It’s Bella.”

“Oh, hey, Bella,” Deputy Steve said affably. “I’ll go get him.”

I waited.

“What’s wrong, Bella?” Charlie demanded as soon as he picked up the phone.

“Can’t I call you at work without there being an emergency?”

He was quiet for a minute. “You never have before. Is there an emergency?”

“No. I just wanted directions to the Blacks’ place—I’m not sure I can remember the way. I want to visit Jacob. I haven’t seen him in months.”

When Charlie spoke again, his voice was much happier. “That’s a great idea, Bells. Do you have a pen?”

The directions he gave me were very simple. I assured him that I would be back for dinner, though he tried to tell me not to hurry. He wanted to join me in La Push, and I wasn’t having that.

So it was with a deadline that I drove too quickly through the storm-darkened streets out of town. I hoped I could get Jacob alone. Billy would probably tell on me if he knew what I was up to.

While I drove, I worried a little bit about Billy’s reaction to seeing me. He would be too pleased. In Billy’s mind, no doubt, this had all worked out better than he had dared to hope. His pleasure and relief would only remind me of the one I couldn’t bear to be reminded of. Not again today, I pleaded silently. I was spent.

The Blacks’ house was vaguely familiar, a small wooden place with narrow windows, the dull red paint making it resemble a tiny barn. Jacob’s head peered out of the window before I could even get out of the truck. No doubt the familiar roar of the engine had tipped him off to my approach. Jacob had been very grateful when Charlie bought Billy’s truck for me, saving Jacob from having to drive it when he came of age. I liked my truck very much, but Jacob seemed to consider the speed restrictions a shortcoming.

He met me halfway to the house.

“Bella!” His excited grin stretched wide across his face, the bright teeth standing in vivid contrast to the deep russet color of his skin. I’d never seen his hair

out of its usual ponytail before. It fell like black satin curtains on either side of his broad face.

Jacob had grown into some of his potential in the last eight months. He'd passed that point where the soft muscles of childhood hardened into the solid, lanky build of a teenager; the tendons and veins had become prominent under the red-brown skin of his arms, his hands. His face was still sweet like I remembered it, though it had hardened, too—the planes of his cheekbones sharper, his jaw squared off, all childish roundness gone.

"Hey, Jacob!" I felt an unfamiliar surge of enthusiasm at his smile. I realized that I was pleased to see him. This knowledge surprised me.

I smiled back, and something clicked silently into place, like two corresponding puzzle pieces. I'd forgotten how much I really liked Jacob Black.

He stopped a few feet away from me, and I stared up at him in surprise, leaning my head back though the rain pelted my face.

"You grew again!" I accused in amazement.

He laughed, his smile widening impossibly. "Six five," he announced with self-satisfaction. His voice was deeper, but it had the husky tone I remembered.

"Is it ever going to stop?" I shook my head in disbelief. "You're huge."

"Still a beanpole, though." He grimaced. "Come inside! You're getting all wet."

He led the way, twisting his hair in his big hands as he walked. He pulled a rubber band from his hip pocket and wound it around the bundle.

“Hey, Dad,” he called as he ducked to get through the front door. “Look who stopped by.”

Billy was in the tiny square living room, a book in his hands. He set the book in his lap and wheeled himself forward when he saw me.

“Well, what do you know! It’s good to see you, Bella.”

We shook hands. Mine was lost in his wide grasp.

“What brings you out here? Everything okay with Charlie?”

“Yes, absolutely. I just wanted to see Jacob—I haven’t seen him in forever.”

Jacob’s eyes brightened at my words. He was smiling so big it looked like it would hurt his cheeks.

“Can you stay for dinner?” Billy was eager, too.

“No, I’ve got to feed Charlie, you know.”

“I’ll call him now,” Billy suggested. “He’s always invited.”

I laughed to hide my discomfort. “It’s not like you’ll never see me again. I promise I’ll be back again soon—so much you’ll get sick of me.” After all, if Jacob could fix the bike, someone had to teach me how to ride it.

Billy chuckled in response. “Okay, maybe next time.”

"So, Bella, what do you want to do?" Jacob asked.

"Whatever. What were you doing before I interrupted?" I was strangely comfortable here. It was familiar, but only distantly. There were no painful reminders of the recent past.

Jacob hesitated. "I was just heading out to work on my car, but we can do something else . . ."

"No, that's perfect!" I interrupted. "I'd love to see your car."

"Okay," he said, not convinced. "It's out back, in the garage."

Even better, I thought to myself. I waved at Billy. "See you later."

A thick stand of trees and shrubbery concealed his garage from the house. The garage was no more than a couple of big preformed sheds that had been bolted together with their interior walls knocked out. Under this shelter, raised on cinder blocks, was what looked to me like a completed automobile. I recognized the symbol on the grille, at least.

"What kind of Volkswagen is that?" I asked.

"It's an old Rabbit—1986, a classic."

"How's it going?"

"Almost finished," he said cheerfully. And then his voice dropped into a lower key. "My dad made good on his promise last spring."

"Ah," I said.

He seemed to understand my reluctance to open the subject. I tried not to remember last May at the prom. Jacob had been bribed by his father with money and car parts to deliver a message there. Billy wanted me to stay a safe distance from the most important person in my life. It turned out that his concern was, in the end, unnecessary. I was all too safe now.

But I was going to see what I could do to change that.

"Jacob, what do you know about motorcycles?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Some. My friend Embry has a dirt bike. We work on it together sometimes. Why?"

"Well...," I pursed my lips as I considered. I wasn't sure if he could keep his mouth shut, but I didn't have many other options. "I recently acquired a couple of bikes, and they're not in the greatest condition. I wonder if you could get them running?"

"Cool." He seemed truly pleased by the challenge. His face glowed. "I'll give it a try."

I held up one finger in warning. "The thing is," I explained, "Charlie doesn't approve of motorcycles. Honestly, he'd probably bust a vein in his forehead if he knew about this. So you can't tell Billy."

"Sure, sure." Jacob smiled. "I understand."

"I'll pay you," I continued.

This offended him. "No. I want to help. You can't pay me."

"Well...how about a trade, then?" I was making this up as I went, but it seemed reasonable enough. "I

only need one bike—and I'll need lessons, too. So how about this? I'll give you the other bike, and then you can teach me."

"Swee-eet." He made the word into two syllables.

"Wait a sec—are you legal yet? When's your birthday?"

"You missed it," he teased, narrowing his eyes in mock resentment. "I'm sixteen."

"Not that your age ever stopped you before," I muttered. "Sorry about your birthday."

"Don't worry about it. I missed yours. What are you, forty?"

I sniffed. "Close."

"We'll have a joint party to make up for it."

"Sounds like a date."

His eyes sparkled at the word.

I needed to reign in the enthusiasm before I gave him the wrong idea—it was just that it had been a long time since I'd felt so light and buoyant. The rarity of the feeling made it more difficult to manage.

"Maybe when the bikes are finished—our present to ourselves," I added.

"Deal. When will you bring them down?"

I bit my lip, embarrassed. "They're in my truck now," I admitted.

“Great.” He seemed to mean it.

“Will Billy see if we bring them around?”

He winked at me. “We’ll be sneaky.”

We eased around from the east, sticking to the trees when we were in view of the windows, affecting a casual-looking stroll, just in case. Jacob unloaded the bikes swiftly from the truck bed, wheeling them one by one into the shrubbery where I hid. It looked too easy for him—I’d remembered the bikes being much, much heavier than that.

“These aren’t half bad,” Jacob appraised as we pushed them through the cover of the trees. “This one here will actually be worth something when I’m done—it’s an old Harley Sprint.”

“That one’s yours, then.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“These are going to take some cash, though,” he said, frowning down at the blackened metal. “We’ll have to save up for parts first.”

“We nothing,” I disagreed. “If you’re doing this for free, I’ll pay for the parts.”

“I don’t know…,” he muttered.

“I’ve got some money saved. College fund, you know.” College, schmollege, I thought to myself. It wasn’t like I’d saved up enough to go anywhere special—and besides, I had no desire to leave Forks anyway. What

difference would it make if I skimmed a little bit off the top?

Jacob just nodded. This all made perfect sense to him.

As we skulked back to the makeshift garage, I contemplated my luck. Only a teenage boy would agree to this: deceiving both our parents while repairing dangerous vehicles using money meant for my college education. He didn't see anything wrong with that picture. Jacob was a gift from the gods.

# Chapter 6

## FRIENDS

The motorcycles didn't need to be hidden any further than simply placing them in Jacob's shed. Billy's wheelchair couldn't maneuver the uneven ground separating it from the house.

Jacob started pulling the first bike—the red one, which was destined for me—to pieces immediately. He opened up the passenger door of the Rabbit so I could sit on the seat instead of the ground. While he worked, Jacob chattered happily, needing only the lightest of nudges from me to keep the conversation rolling. He updated me on the progress of his sophomore year of school, running on about his classes and his two best friends.

"Quil and Embry?" I interrupted. "Those are unusual names."

Jacob chuckled. "Quil's is a hand-me-down, and I think Embry got named after a soap opera star. I can't say anything, though. They fight dirty if you start on their names—they'll tag team you."

"Good friends." I raised one eyebrow.

"No, they are. Just don't mess with their names."

Just then a call echoed in the distance. "Jacob?" someone shouted.

"Is that Billy?" I asked.

"No." Jacob ducked his head, and it looked like he was blushing under his brown skin. "Speak of the devil," he mumbled, "and the devil shall appear."

"Jake? Are you out here?" The shouting voice was closer now.

"Yeah!" Jacob shouted back, and sighed.

We waited through the short silence until two tall, dark-skinned boys strolled around the corner into the shed.

One was slender, and almost as tall as Jacob. His black hair was chin-length and parted down the middle, one side tucked behind his left ear while the right side swung free. The shorter boy was more burly. His white T-shirt strained over his well-developed chest, and he seemed gleefully conscious of that fact. His hair was so short it was almost a buzz.

Both boys stopped short when they saw me. The thin boy glanced swiftly back and forth between Jacob and me, while the brawny boy kept his eyes on me, a slow smile spreading across his face.

"Hey, guys," Jacob greeted them halfheartedly.

"Hey, Jake," the short one said without looking away from me. I had to smile in response, his grin was so impish. When I did, he winked at me. "Hi, there."

"Quil, Embry—this is my friend, Bella."

Quil and Embry, I still didn't know which was which, exchanged a loaded look.

"Charlie's kid, right?" the brawny boy asked me, holding out his hand.

“That’s right,” I confirmed, shaking hands with him. His grasp was firm; it looked like he was flexing his bicep.

“I’m Quil Ateara,” he announced grandly before releasing my hand.

“Nice to meet you, Quil.”

“Hey, Bella. I’m Embry, Embry Call—you probably already figured that out, though.” Embry smiled a shy smile and waved with one hand, which he then shoved in the pocket of his jeans.

I nodded. “Nice to meet you, too.”

“So what are you guys doing?” Quil asked, still looking at me.

“Bella and I are going to fix up these bikes,” Jacob explained inaccurately. But bikes seemed to be the magic word. Both boys went to examine Jacob’s project, drilling him with educated questions. Many of the words they used were unfamiliar to me, and I figured I’d have to have a Y chromosome to really understand the excitement.

They were still immersed in talk of parts and pieces when I decided that I needed to head back home before Charlie showed up here. With a sigh, I slid out of the Rabbit.

Jacob looked up, apologetic. “We’re boring you, aren’t we?”

“Naw.” And it wasn’t a lie. I was enjoying myself—how strange. “I just have to go cook dinner for Charlie.”

"Oh…well, I'll finish taking these apart tonight and figure out what more we'll need to get started rebuilding them. When do you want to work on them again?"

"Could I come back tomorrow?" Sundays were the bane of my existence. There was never enough homework to keep me busy.

Quil nudged Embry's arm and they exchanged grins.

Jacob smiled in delight. "That would be great!"

"If you make a list, we can go shop for parts," I suggested.

Jacob's face fell a little. "I'm still not sure I should let you pay for everything."

I shook my head. "No way. I'm bankrolling this party. You just have to supply the labor and expertise."

Embry rolled his eyes at Quil.

"That doesn't seem right," Jacob shook his head.

"Jake, if I took these to a mechanic, how much would he charge me?" I pointed out.

He smiled. "Okay, you're getting a deal."

"Not to mention the riding lessons," I added.

Quil grinned widely at Embry and whispered something I didn't catch. Jacob's hand flashed out to smack the back of Quil's head. "That's it, get out," he muttered.

“No, really, I have to go,” I protested, heading for the door. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Jacob.”

As soon as I was out of sight, I heard Quil and Embry chorus, “Wooooo!”

The sound of a brief scuffle followed, interspersed with an “ouch” and a “hey!”

“If either of you set so much as one toe on my land tomorrow . . .” I heard Jacob threaten. His voice was lost as I walked through the trees.

I giggled quietly. The sound made my eyes widen in wonder. I was laughing, actually laughing, and there wasn’t even anyone watching. I felt so weightless that I laughed again, just make the feeling last longer.

I beat Charlie home. When he walked in I was just taking the fried chicken out of the pan and laying it on a pile of paper towels.

“Hey, Dad.” I flashed him a grin.

Shock flitted across his face before he pulled his expression together. “Hey, honey,” he said, his voice uncertain. “Did you have fun with Jacob?”

I started moving the food to the table. “Yeah, I did.”

“Well, that’s good.” He was still cautious. “What did you two do?”

Now it was my turn to be cautious. “I hung out in his garage and watched him work. Did you know he’s rebuilding a Volkswagen?”

“Yeah, I think Billy mentioned that.”

The interrogation had to stop when Charlie began chewing, but he continued to study my face as he ate.

After dinner, I dithered around, cleaning the kitchen twice, and then did my homework slowly in the front room while Charlie watched a hockey game. I waited as long as I could, but finally Charlie mentioned the late hour. When I didn't respond, he got up, stretched, and then left, turning out the light behind him. Reluctantly, I followed.

As I climbed the stairs, I felt the last of the afternoon's abnormal sense of well-being drain from my system, replaced by a dull fear at the thought of what I was going to have to live through now.

I wasn't numb anymore. Tonight would, no doubt, be as horrific as last night. I lay down on my bed and curled into a ball in preparation for the onslaught. I squeezed my eyes shut and…the next thing I next I knew, it was morning.

I stared at the pale silver light coming through my window, stunned.

For the first time in more than four months, I'd slept without dreaming. Dreaming or screaming. I couldn't tell which emotion was stronger—the relief or the shock.

I lay still in my bed for a few minutes, waiting for it to come back. Because something must be coming. If not the pain, then the numbness. I waited, but nothing happened. I felt more rested than I had in a long time.

I didn't trust this to last. It was a slippery, precarious edge that I balanced on, and it wouldn't take much to knock me back down. Just glancing around my room

with these suddenly clear eyes—noticing how strange it looked, too tidy, like I didn't live here at all—was dangerous.

I pushed that thought from my mind, and concentrated, as I got dressed, on the fact that I was going to see Jacob again today. The thought made me feel almost…hopeful. Maybe it would be the same as yesterday. Maybe I wouldn't have to remind myself to look interested and to nod or smile at appropriate intervals, the way I had to with everyone else. Maybe…but I wouldn't trust this to last, either. Wouldn't trust it to be the same—so easy—as yesterday. I wasn't going to set myself up for disappointment like that.

At breakfast, Charlie was being careful, too. He tried to hide his scrutiny, keeping his eyes on his eggs until he thought I wasn't looking.

"What are you up to today?" he asked, eyeing a loose thread on the edge of his cuff like he wasn't paying much attention to my answer.

"I'm going to hang out with Jacob again."

He nodded without looking up. "Oh," he said.

"Do you mind?" I pretended to worry. "I could stay…."

He glanced up quickly, a hint of panic in his eyes. "No, no! You go ahead. Harry was going to come up to watch the game with me anyway."

"Maybe Harry could give Billy a ride up," I suggested. The fewer witnesses the better.

"That's a great idea."

I wasn't sure if the game was just an excuse for kicking me out, but he looked excited enough now. He headed to the phone while I donned my rain jacket. I felt self- conscious with the checkbook shoved in my jacket pocket. It was something I never used.

Outside, the rain came down like water slopped from a bucket. I had to drive more slowly than I wanted to; I could hardly see a car length in front of the truck. But I finally made it through the muddy lanes to Jacob's house. Before I'd killed the engine, the front door opened and Jacob came running out with a huge black umbrella.

He held it over my door while I opened it.

"Charlie called—said you were on your way," Jacob explained with a grin.

Effortlessly, without a conscious command to the muscles around my lips, my answering smile spread across my face. A strange feeling of warmth bubbled up in my throat, despite the icy rain splattering on my cheeks.

"Hi, Jacob."

"Good call on inviting Billy up." He held up his hand for a high five.

I had to reach so high to slap his hand that he laughed.

Harry showed up to get Billy just a few minutes later. Jacob took me on a brief tour of his tiny room while we waited to be unsupervised.

"So where to, Mr. Goodwrench?" I asked as soon as the door closed behind Billy.

Jacob pulled a folded paper out of his pocket and smoothed it out. “We’ll start at the dump first, see if we can get lucky. This could get a little expensive,” he warned me. “Those bikes are going to need a lot of help before they’ll run again.” My face didn’t look worried enough, so he continued. “I’m talking about maybe more than a hundred dollars here.”

I pulled my checkbook out, fanned myself with it, and rolled my eyes at his worries. “We’re covered.”

It was a very strange kind of day. I enjoyed myself. Even at the dump, in the slopping rain and ankle-deep mud. I wondered at first if it was just the aftershock of losing the numbness, but I didn’t think that was enough of an explanation.

I was beginning to think it was mostly Jacob. It wasn’t just that he was always so happy to see me, or that he didn’t watch me out of the corner of his eye, waiting for me to do something that would mark me as crazy or depressed. It was nothing that related to me at all.

It was Jacob himself. Jacob was simply a perpetually happy person, and he carried that happiness with him like an aura, sharing it with whoever was near him. Like an earthbound sun, whenever someone was within his gravitational pull, Jacob warmed them. It was natural, a part of who he was. No wonder I was so eager to see him.

Even when he commented on the gaping hole in my dashboard, it didn’t send me into a panic like it should have.

“Did the stereo break?” he wondered.

“Yeah,” I lied.

He poked around in the cavity. “Who took it out? There’s a lot of damage....”

“I did,” I admitted.

He laughed. “Maybe you shouldn’t touch the motor cycles too much.”

“No problem.”

According to Jacob, we did get lucky at the dump. He was very excited about several grease-blackened pieces of twisted metal that he found; I was just impressed that he could tell what they were supposed to be.

From there we went to the Checker Auto Parts down in Hoquiam. In my truck, it was more than a two hour drive south on the winding freeway, but the time passed easily with Jacob. He chattered about his friends and his school, and I found myself asking questions, not even pretending, truly curious to hear what he had to say.

“I’m doing all the talking,” he complained after a long story about Quil and the trouble he’d stirred up by asking out a senior’s steady girlfriend. “Why don’t you take a turn? What’s going on in Forks? It has to be more exciting than La Push.”

“Wrong,” I sighed. “There’s really nothing. Your friends are a lot more interesting than mine. I like your friends. Quil’s funny.”

He frowned. “I think Quil likes you, too.”

I laughed. “He’s a little young for me.”

Jacob's frown deepened. "He's not that much younger than you. It's just a year and a few months."

I had a feeling we weren't talking about Quil anymore. I kept my voice light, teasing. "Sure, but, considering the difference in maturity between guys and girls, don't you have to count that in dog years? What does that make me, about twelve years older?"

He laughed, rolling his eyes. "Okay, but if you're going to get picky like that, you have to average in size, too. You're so small, I'll have to knock ten years off your total."

"Five foot four is perfectly average." I sniffed. "It's not my fault you're a freak."

We bantered like that till Hoquiam, still arguing over the correct formula to determine age—I lost two more years because I didn't know how to change a tire, but gained one back for being in charge of the bookkeeping at my house—until we were in Checker, and Jacob had to concentrate again. We found everything left on his list, and Jacob felt confident that he could make a lot of progress with our haul.

By the time we got back to La Push, I was twenty-three and he was thirty—he was definitely weighting skills in his favor.

I hadn't forgotten the reason for what I was doing. And, even though I was enjoying myself more than I'd thought possible, there was no lessening of my original desire. I still wanted to cheat. It was senseless, and I really didn't care. I was going to be as reckless as I could possibly manage in Forks. I would not be the only keeper of an empty contract. Getting to spend time with Jacob was just a much bigger perk than I'd expected.

Billy wasn't back yet, so we didn't have to be sneaky about unloading our day's spoils. As soon as we had everything laid out on the plastic floor next to Jacob's toolbox, he went right to work, still talking and laughing while his fingers combed expertly through the metal pieces in front of him.

Jacob's skill with his hands was fascinating. They looked too big for the delicate tasks they performed with ease and precision. While he worked, he seemed almost graceful. Unlike when he was on his feet; there, his height and big feet made him nearly as dangerous as I was.

Quil and Embry did not show up, so maybe his threat yesterday had been taken seriously.

The day passed too quickly. It got dark outside the mouth of the garage before I was expecting it, and then we heard Billy calling for us.

I jumped up to help Jacob put things away, hesitating because I wasn't sure what I should touch.

"Just leave it," he said. "I'll work on it later tonight."

"Don't forget your schoolwork or anything," I said, feeling a little guilty. I didn't want him to get in trouble. That plan was just for me.

"Bella?"

Both our heads snapped up as Charlie's familiar voice wafted through the trees, sounding closer than the house.

"Shoot," I muttered. "Coming!" I yelled toward the house.

"Let's go." Jacob smiled, enjoying the cloak-and-dagger. He snapped the light off, and for a moment I was blind. Jacob grabbed my hand and towed me out of the garage and through the trees, his feet finding the familiar path easily. His hand was rough, and very warm.

Despite the path, we were both tripping over our feet in the darkness. So we were also both laughing when the house came into view. The laughter did not go deep; it was light and superficial, but still nice. I was sure he wouldn't notice the faint hint of hysteria. I wasn't used to laughing, and it felt right and also very wrong at the same time.

Charlie was standing under the little back porch, and Billy was sitting in the doorway behind them.

"Hey, Dad," we both said at the same time, and that started us laughing again.

Charlie stared at me with wide eyes that flashed down to note Jacob's hand around mine.

"Billy invited us for dinner," Charlie said to us in an absentminded tone.

"My super secret recipe for spaghetti. Handed down for generations," Billy said gravely.

Jacob snorted. "I don't think Ragu's actually been around that long."

The house was crowded. Harry Clearwater was there, too, with his family—his wife, Sue, whom I knew vaguely from my childhood summers in Forks, and his two children. Leah was a senior like me, but a year older. She was beautiful in an exotic way—perfect copper skin, glistening black hair, eyelashes

like feather dusters—and preoccupied. She was on Billy's phone when we got in, and she never let it go. Seth was fourteen; he hung on Jacob's every word with idolizing eyes.

There were too many of us for the kitchen table, so Charlie and Harry brought chairs out to the yard, and we ate spaghetti off plates on our laps in the dim light from Billy's open door. The men talked about the game, and Harry and Charlie made fishing plans. Sue teased her husband about his cholesterol and tried, unsuccessfully, to shame him into eating something green and leafy. Jacob talked mostly to me and Seth, who interrupted eagerly whenever Jacob seemed in danger of forgetting him. Charlie watched me, trying to be inconspicuous about it, with pleased but cautious eyes.

It was loud and sometimes confusing as everyone talked over everyone else, and the laughter from one joke interrupted the telling of another. I didn't have to speak often, but I smiled a lot, and only because I felt like it.

I didn't want to leave.

This was Washington, though, and the inevitable rain eventually broke up the party; Billy's living room was much too small to provide an option for continuing the get-together. Harry had driven Charlie down, so we rode together in my truck on the way back home. He asked about my day, and I told mostly the truth—that I'd gone with Jacob to look at parts and then watched him work in his garage.

"You think you'll visit again anytime soon?" he wondered, trying to be casual about it.

"Tomorrow after school," I admitted. "I'll take homework, don't worry."

"You be sure to do that," he ordered, trying to disguise his satisfaction.

I was nervous when we got to the house. I didn't want to go upstairs. The warmth of Jacob's presence was fading and, in its absence, the anxiety grew stronger. I was sure I wouldn't get away with two peaceful nights of sleep in a row.

To put bedtime off, I checked my e-mail; there was a new message from Reneé.

She wrote about her day, a new book club that filled the time slot of the meditation classes she'd just quit, her week subbing in the second grade, missing her kindergarteners. She wrote that Phil was enjoying his new coaching job, and that they were planning a second honeymoon trip to Disney World.

And I noticed that the whole thing read like a journal entry, rather than a letter to someone else. Remorse flooded through me, leaving an uncomfortable sting behind. Some daughter I was.

I wrote back to her quickly, commenting on each part of her letter, volunteering information of my own—describing the spaghetti party at Billy's and how I felt watching Jacob build useful things out of small pieces of metal—awed and slightly envious. I made no reference to the change this letter would be from the ones she'd received in the last several months. I could barely remember what I'd written to her even as recently as last week, but I was sure it wasn't very responsive. The more I thought about it, the guiltier I felt; I really must have worried her.

I stayed up extra late after that, finishing more homework than strictly necessary. But neither sleep deprivation nor the time spent with Jacob—being almost happy in a shallow kind of way—could keep the dream away for two nights in a row.

I woke shuddering, my scream muffled by the pillow.

As the dim morning light filtered through the fog outside my window, I lay still in bed and tried to shake off the dream. There had been a small difference last night, and I concentrated on that.

Last night I had not been alone in the woods. Sam Uley—the man who had pulled me from the forest floor that night I couldn't bear to think of consciously—was there. It was an odd, unexpected alteration. The man's dark eyes had been surprisingly unfriendly, filled with some secret he didn't seem inclined to share. I'd stared at him as often as my frantic searching had allowed; it made me uncomfortable, under all the usual panic, to have him there. Maybe that was because, when I didn't look directly at him, his shape seemed to shiver and change in my peripheral vision. Yet he did nothing but stand and watch. Unlike the time when we had met in reality, he did not offer me his help.

Charlie stared at me during breakfast, and I tried to ignore him. I supposed I deserved it. I couldn't expect him not to worry. It would probably be weeks before he stopped watching for the return of the zombie, and I would just have to try to not let it bother me. After all, I would be watching for the return of the zombie, too. Two days was hardly long enough to call me cured.

School was the opposite. Now that I was paying attention, it was clear that no one was watching here.

I remembered the first day I'd come to Forks High School—how desperately I'd wished that I could turn gray, fade into the wet concrete of the sidewalk like an oversized chameleon. It seemed I was getting that wish answered, a year late.

It was like I wasn't there. Even my teachers' eyes slid past my seat as if it were empty.

I listened all through the morning, hearing once again the voices of the people around me. I tried to catch up on what was going on, but the conversations were so disjointed that I gave up.

Jessica didn't look up when I sat down next to her in Calculus.

"Hey, Jess," I said with put-on nonchalance. "How was the rest of your weekend?"

She looked at me with suspicious eyes. Could she still be angry? Or was she just too impatient to deal with a crazy person?

"Super," she said, turning back to her book.

"That's good," I mumbled.

The figure of speech cold shoulder seemed to have some literal truth to it. I could feel the warm air blowing from the floor vents, but I was still too cold. I took the jacket off the back of my chair and put it on again.

My fourth hour class got out late, and the lunch table I always sat at was full by the time I arrived. Mike was there, Jessica and Angela, Conner, Tyler, Eric and Lauren. Katie Marshall, the redheaded junior who lived around the corner from me, was sitting with

Eric, and Austin Marks—older brother to the boy with the motor cycles—was next to her. I wondered how long they'd been sitting here, unable to remember if this was the first day or something that was a regular habit.

I was beginning to get annoyed with myself. I might as well have been packed in Styrofoam peanuts through the last semester.

No one looked up when I sat down next to Mike, even though the chair squealed stridently against the linoleum as I dragged it back.

I tried to catch up with the conversation.

Mike and Conner were talking sports, so I gave up on that one at once.

"Where's Ben today?" Lauren was asking Angela. I perked up, interested. I wondered if that meant Angela and Ben were still together.

I barely recognized Lauren. She'd cut off all her blond, corn-silk hair—now she had a pixie cut so short that the back was shaved like a boy. What an odd thing for her to do. I wished I knew the reason behind it. Did she get gum stuck in it? Did she sell it? Had all the people she was habitually nasty to caught her behind the gym and scalped her? I decided it wasn't fair for me to judge her now by my former opinion. For all I knew, she'd turned into a nice person.

"Ben's got the stomach flu," Angela said in her quiet, calm voice. "Hopefully it's just some twenty-four hour thing. He was really sick last night."

Angela had changed her hair, too. She'd grown out her layers.

"What did you two do this weekend?" Jessica asked, not sounding as if she cared about the answer. I'd bet that this was just an opener so she could tell her own stories. I wondered if she would talk about Port Angeles with me sitting two seats away? Was I that invisible, that no one would feel uncomfortable discussing me while I was here?

"We were going to have a picnic Saturday, actually, but…we changed our minds," Angela said. There was an edge to her voice that caught my interest.

Jess, not so much. "That's too bad," she said, about to launch into her story. But I wasn't the only one who was paying attention.

"What happened?" Lauren asked curiously.

"Well," Angela said, seeming more hesitant than usual, though she was always reserved, "we drove up north, almost to the hot springs—there's a good spot just about a mile up the trail. But, when we were halfway there…we saw something."

"Saw something? What?" Lauren's pale eyebrows pulled together. Even Jess seemed to be listening now.

"I don't know," Angela said. "We think it was a bear. It was black, anyway, but it seemed…too big."

Lauren snorted. "Oh, not you, too!" Her eyes turned mocking, and I decided I didn't need to give her the benefit of the doubt. Obviously her personality had not changed as much as her hair. "Tyler tried to sell me that one last week."

"You're not going to see any bears that close to the resort," Jessica said, siding with Lauren.

“Really,” Angela protested in a low voice, looking down at the table. “We did see it.”

Lauren snickered. Mike was still talking to Conner, not paying attention to the girls.

“No, she’s right,” I threw in impatiently. “We had a hiker in just Saturday who saw the bear, too, Angela. He said it was huge and black and just outside of town, didn’t he, Mike?”

There was a moment of silence. Every pair of eyes at the table turned to stare at me in shock. The new girl, Katie, had her mouth hanging open like she’d just witnessed an explosion. Nobody moved.

“Mike?” I muttered, mortified. “Remember the guy with the bear story?”

“S-sure,” Mike stuttered after a second. I didn’t know why he was looking at me so strangely. I talked to him at work, didn’t I? Did I? I thought so….

Mike recovered. “Yeah, there was a guy who said he saw a huge black bear right at the trailhead—bigger than a grizzly,” he confirmed.

“Hmph.” Lauren turned to Jessica, her shoulders stiff, and changed the subject.

“Did you hear back from USC?” she asked.

Everyone else looked away, too, except for Mike and Angela. Angela smiled at me tentatively, and I hurried to return the smile.

“So, what did you do this weekend, Bella?” Mike asked, curious, but oddly wary.

Everyone but Lauren looked back, waiting for my response.

"Friday night, Jessica and I went to a movie in Port Angeles. And then I spent Saturday afternoon and most of Sunday down at La Push."

The eyes flickered to Jessica and back to me. Jess looked irritated. I wondered if she didn't want anyone to know she'd gone out with me, or whether she just wanted to be the one to tell the story.

"What movie did you see?" Mike asked, starting to smile.

"Dead End—the one with the zombies." I grinned in encouragement. Maybe some of the damage I'd done in these past zombie months was reparable.

"I heard that was scary. Did you think so?" Mike was eager to continue the conversation.

"Bella had to leave at the end, she was so freaked," Jessica inserted with a sly smile.

I nodded, trying to look embarrassed. "It was pretty scary."

Mike didn't stop asking me questions till lunch was over. Gradually, the others were able to start up their own conversations again, though they still looked at me a lot. Angela talked mostly to Mike and me, and, when I got up to dump my tray, she followed.

"Thanks," she said in a low voice when we were away from the table.

"For what?"

"Speaking up, sticking up for me."

"No problem."

She looked at me with concern, but not the offensive, maybe-she's-lost-it kind. "Are you okay?"

This is why I'd picked Jessica over Angela—though I'd always liked Angela more—for the girls' night movie. Angela was too perceptive.

"Not completely," I admitted. "But I'm a little bit better."

"I'm glad," she said. "I've missed you."

Lauren and Jessica strolled by us then, and I heard Lauren whisper loudly, "Oh, joy. Bella's back."

Angela rolled her eyes at them, and smiled at me in encouragement.

I sighed. It was like I was starting all over again.

"What's today's date?" I wondered suddenly.

"It's January nineteenth."

"Hmm."

"What is it?" Angela asked.

"It was a year ago yesterday that I had my first day here," I mused.

"Nothing's changed much," Angela muttered, looking after Lauren and Jessica.

“I know,” I agreed. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

# Chapter 7

## REPETITION

I wasn't sure what the hell I was doing here.

Was I trying to push myself back into the zombie stupor? Had I turned masochistic—developed a taste for torture? I should have gone straight down to La Push. I felt much, much healthier around Jacob. This was not a healthy thing to do.

But I continued to drive slowly down the overgrown lane, twisting through the trees that arched over me like a green, living tunnel. My hands were shaking, so I tightened my grip on the steering wheel.

I knew that part of the reason I did this was the nightmare; now that I was really awake, the nothingness of the dream gnawed on my nerves, a dog worrying a bone. There was something to search for. Unattainable and impossible, uncaring and distracted…but he was out there, somewhere. I had to believe that.

The other part was the strange sense of repetition I'd felt at school today, the coincidence of the date. The feeling that I was starting over—perhaps the way my first day would have gone if I'd really been the most unusual person in the cafeteria that afternoon.

The words ran through my head, tonelessly, like I was reading them rather than hearing them spoken:

It will be as if I'd never existed.

I was lying to myself by splitting my reason for coming here into just two parts. I didn't want to admit

the strongest motivation. Because it was mentally unsound.

The truth was that I wanted to hear his voice again, like I had in the strange delusion Friday night. For that brief moment, when his voice came from some other part of me than my conscious memory, when his voice was perfect and honey smooth rather than the pale echo my memories usually produced, I was able to remember without pain. It hadn't lasted; the pain had caught up with me, as I was sure it would for this fool's errand. But those precious moments when I could hear him again were an irresistible lure. I had to find some way to repeat the experience…or maybe the better word was episode.

I was hoping that déjà vu was the key. So I was going to his home, a place I hadn't been since my ill-fated birthday party, so many months ago.

The thick, almost jungle-like growth crawled slowly past my windows. The drive wound on and on. I started to go faster, getting edgy. How long had I been driving? Shouldn't I have reached the house yet? The lane was so overgrown that it did not look familiar.

What if I couldn't find it? I shivered. What if there was no tangible proof at all?

Then there was the break in the trees that I was looking for, only it was not so pronounced as before. The flora here did not wait long to reclaim any land that was left unguarded. The tall ferns had infiltrated the meadow around the house, crowding against the trunks of the cedars, even the wide porch. It was like the lawn had been flooded—waist-high—with green, feathery waves.

And the house was there, but it was not the same. Though nothing had changed on the outside, the emptiness screamed from the blank windows. It was creepy. For the first time since I'd seen the beautiful house, it looked like a fitting haunt for vampires.

I hit the brakes, looking away. I was afraid to go farther.

But nothing happened. No voice in my head.

So I left the engine running and jumped out into the fern sea. Maybe, like Friday night, if I walked forward…

I approached the barren, vacant face slowly, my truck rumbling out a comforting roar behind me. I stopped when I got to the porch stairs, because there was nothing here. No lingering sense of their presence…of his presence. The house was solidly here, but it meant little. Its concrete reality would not counteract the nothingness of the nightmares.

I didn't go any closer. I didn't want to look in the windows. I wasn't sure which would be harder to see. If the rooms were bare, echoing empty from floor to ceiling, that would certainly hurt. Like my grandmother's funeral, when my mother had insisted that I stay outside during the viewing. She had said that I didn't need to see Gran that way, to remember her that way, rather than alive.

But wouldn't it be worse if there were no change? If the couches sat just as I'd last seen them, the paintings on the walls—worse still, the piano on its low platform? It would be second only to the house disappearing all together, to see that there was no physical possession that tied them in anyway. That

everything remained, untouched and forgotten, behind them.

Just like me.

I turned my back on the gaping emptiness and hurried to my truck. I nearly ran. I was anxious to be gone, to get back to the human world. I felt hideously empty, and I wanted to see Jacob. Maybe I was developing a new kind of sickness, another addiction, like the numbness before. I didn't care. I pushed my truck as fast as it would go as I barreled toward my fix.

Jacob was waiting for me. My chest seemed to relax as soon as I saw him, making it easier to breathe.

"Hey, Bella," he called.

I smiled in relief. "Hey, Jacob." I waved at Billy, who was looking out the window.

"Let's get to work," Jacob said in a low but eager voice.

I was somehow able to laugh. "You seriously aren't sick of me yet?" I wondered. He must be starting to ask himself how desperate I was for company.

Jacob led the way around the house to his garage.

"Nope. Not yet."

"Please let me know when I start getting on your nerves. I don't want to be a pain."

"Okay." He laughed, a throaty sound. "I wouldn't hold your breath for that, though."

When I walked into the garage, I was shocked to see the red bike standing up, looking like a motorcycle rather than a pile of jagged metal.

“Jake, you’re amazing,” I breathed.

He laughed again. “I get obsessive when I have a project.” He shrugged. “If I had any brains I’d drag it out a little bit.”

“Why?”

He looked down, pausing for so long that I wondered if he hadn’t heard my question. Finally, he asked me, “Bella, if I told you that I couldn’t fix these bikes, what would you say?”

I didn’t answer right away, either, and he glanced up to check my expression.

“I would say…that’s too bad, but I’ll bet we could figure out something else to do. If we got really desperate, we could even do homework.”

Jacob smiled, and his shoulders relaxed. He sat down next to the bike and picked up a wrench. “So you think you’ll still come over when I’m done, then?”

“Is that what you meant?” I shook my head. “I guess I am taking advantage of your very underpriced mechanical skills. But as long as you let me come over, I’ll be here.”

“Hoping to see Quil again?” he teased.

“You caught me.”

He chuckled. “You really like spending time with me?” he asked, marveling.

“Very, very much. And I’ll prove it. I have to work tomorrow, but Wednesday we’ll do something nonmechanical.”

“Like what?”

“I have no idea. We can go to my place so you won’t be tempted to be obsessive. You could bring your schoolwork—you have to be getting behind, because I know I am.”

“Homework might be a good idea.” He made a face, and I wondered how much he was leaving undone to be with me.

“Yes,” I agreed. “We’ll have to start being responsible occasionally, or Billy and Charlie aren’t going to be so easygoing about this.” I made a gesture indicating the two of us as a single entity. He liked that—he beamed.

“Homework once a week?” he proposed.

“Maybe we’d better go with twice,” I suggested, thinking of the pile I’d just been assigned today.

He sighed a heavy sigh. Then he reached over his toolbox to a paper grocery sack. He pulled out two cans of soda, cracking one open and handing it to me. He opened the second, and held it up ceremoniously.

“Here’s to responsibility,” he toasted. “Twice a week.”

“And recklessness every day in between,” I emphasized.

He grinned and touched his can to mine.

I got home later than I'd planned and found Charlie had ordered a pizza rather than wait for me. He wouldn't let me apologize.

"I don't mind," he assured me. "You deserve a break from all the cooking, anyway."

I knew he was just relieved that I was still acting like a normal person, and he was not about to rock the boat.

I checked my e-mail before I started on my homework, and there was a long one from Reneé. She gushed over every detail I'd provided her with, so I sent back another exhaustive description of my day. Everything but the motorcycles. Even happy-go-lucky Reneé was likely to be alarmed by that.

School Tuesday had its ups and downs. Angela and Mike seemed ready to welcome me back with open arms—to kindly overlook my few months of aberrant behavior. Jess was more resistant. I wondered if she needed a formal written apology for the Port Angeles incident.

Mike was animated and chatty at work. It was like he'd stored up the semester's worth of talk, and it was all spilling out now. I found that I was able to smile and laugh with him, though it wasn't as effortless as it was with Jacob. It seemed harmless enough, until quitting time.

Mike put the closed sign in the window while I folded my vest and shoved it under the counter.

"This was fun tonight," Mike said happily.

"Yeah," I agreed, though I'd much rather have spent the afternoon in the garage.

"It's too bad that you had to leave the movie early last week."

I was a little confused by his train of thought. I shrugged. "I'm just a wimp, I guess."

"What I mean is, you should go to a better movie, something you'd enjoy," he explained.

"Oh," I muttered, still confused.

"Like maybe this Friday. With me. We could go see something that isn't scary at all."

I bit my lip.

I didn't want to screw things up with Mike, not when he was one of the only people ready to forgive me for being crazy. But this, again, felt far too familiar. Like the last year had never happened. I wished I had Jess as an excuse this time.

"Like a date?" I asked. Honesty was probably the best policy at this point. Get it over with.

He processed the tone of my voice. "If you want. But it doesn't have to be like that."

"I don't date," I said slowly, realizing how true that was. That whole world seemed impossibly distant.

"Just as friends?" he suggested. His clear blue eyes were not as eager now. I hoped he really meant that we could be friends anyway.

"That would be fun. But I actually have plans already this Friday, so maybe next week?"

"What are you doing?" he asked, less casually than I think he wanted to sound.

"Homework. I have a...study session planned with a friend."

"Oh. Okay. Maybe next week."

He walked me to my car, less exuberant than before. It reminded me so clearly of my first months in Forks. I'd come full circle, and now everything felt like an echo—an empty echo, devoid of the interest it used to have.

The next night, Charlie didn't seem the smallest bit surprised to find Jacob and me sprawled across the living room floor with our books scattered around us, so I guessed that he and Billy were talking behind our backs.

"Hey, kids," he said, his eyes straying to the kitchen. The smell of the lasagna I'd spent the afternoon making—while Jacob watched and occasionally sampled—wafted down the hall; I was being good, trying to atone for all the pizza.

Jacob stayed for dinner, and took a plate home for Billy. He grudgingly added another year to my negotiable age for being a good cook.

Friday was the garage, and Saturday, after my shift at Newton's, was homework again. Charlie felt secure enough in my sanity to spend the day fishing with Harry. When he got back, we were all done—feeling very sensible and mature about it, too—and watching Monster Garage on the Discovery Channel.

"I probably ought to go." Jacob sighed. "It's later than I thought."

"Okay, fine," I grumbled. "I'll take you home."

He laughed at my unwilling expression—it seemed to please him.

"Tomorrow, back to work," I said as soon as we were safe in the truck. "What time do you want me to come up?"

There was an unexplained excitement in his answering smile. "I'll call you first, okay?"

"Sure." I frowned to myself, wondering what was up. His smile widened.

I cleaned the house the next morning—waiting for Jacob to call and trying to shake off the latest nightmare. The scenery had changed. Last night I'd wandered in a wide sea of ferns interspersed with huge hemlock trees. There was nothing else there, and I was lost, wandering aimless and alone, searching for nothing. I wanted to kick myself for the stupid field trip last week. I shoved the dream out of my conscious mind, hoping it would stay locked up somewhere and not escape again.

Charlie was outside washing the cruiser, so when the phone rang, I dropped the toilet brush and ran downstairs to answer it.

"Hello?" I asked breathlessly.

"Bella," Jacob said, a strange, formal tone to his voice.

"Hey, Jake."

"I believe that…we have a date," he said, his tone thick with implications.

It took me a second before I got it. “They’re done? I can’t believe it!” What perfect timing. I needed something to distract me from nightmares and nothingness.

“Yeah, they run and everything.”

“Jacob, you are absolutely, without a doubt, the most talented and wonderful person I know. You get ten years for this one.”

“Cool! I’m middle-aged now.”

I laughed. “I’m on my way up!”

I threw the cleaning supplies under the bathroom counter and grabbed my jacket.

“Headed to see Jake,” Charlie said when I ran past him. It wasn’t really a question.

“Yep,” I replied as I jumped in my truck.

“I’ll be at the station later,” Charlie called after me.

“Okay,” I yelled back, turning the key.

Charlie said something else, but I couldn’t hear him clearly over the roar of the engine. It sounded sort of like, “Where’s the fire?”

I parked my truck off to the side of the Blacks’ house, close to the trees, to make it easier for us to sneak the bikes out. When I got out, a splash of color caught my eye—two shiny motorcycles, one red, one black, were hidden under a spruce, invisible from the house. Jacob was prepared.

There was a piece of blue ribbon tied in a small bow around each of the handlebars. I was laughing at that when Jacob ran out of the house.

“Ready?” he asked in a low voice, his eyes sparkling.

I glanced over his shoulder, and there was no sign of Billy.

“Yeah,” I said, but I didn’t feel quite as excited as before; I was trying to imagine myself actually on the motorcycle.

Jacob loaded the bikes into the bed of the truck with ease, laying them carefully on their sides so they didn’t show.

“Let’s go,” he said, his voice higher than usual with excitement. “I know the perfect spot—no one will catch us there.”

We drove south out of town. The dirt road wove in and out of the forest—sometimes there was nothing but trees, and then there would suddenly be a breathtaking glimpse of the Pacific Ocean, reaching to the horizon, dark gray under the clouds. We were above the shore, on top of the cliffs that bordered the beach here, and the view seemed to stretch on forever.

I was driving slowly, so that I could safely stare out across the ocean now and then, as the road wound closer to the sea cliffs. Jacob was talking about finishing the bikes, but his descriptions were getting technical, so I wasn’t paying close attention.

That was when I noticed four figures standing on a rocky ledge, much too close to the precipice. I couldn’t tell from the distance how old they were, but I

assumed they were men. Despite the chill in the air today, they seemed to be wearing only shorts.

As I watched, the tallest person stepped closer to the brink. I slowed automatically, my foot hesitating over the brake pedal.

And then he threw himself off the edge.

“No!” I shouted, stomping down on the brake.

“What’s wrong?” Jacob shouted back, alarmed.

“That guy—he just jumped off the cliff! Why didn’t they stop him? We’ve got to call an ambulance!” I threw open my door and started to get out, which made no sense at all. The fastest way to a phone was to drive back to Billy’s. But I couldn’t believe what I’d just seen. Maybe, subconsciously, I hoped I would see something different without the glass of the windshield in the way.

Jacob laughed, and I spun to stare at him wildly. How could he be so calloused, so cold-blooded?

“They’re just cliff diving, Bella. Recreation. La Push doesn’t have a mall, you know.” He was teasing, but there was a strange note of irritation in his voice.

“Cliff diving?” I repeated, dazed. I stared in disbelief as a second figure stepped to the edge, paused, and then very gracefully leaped into space. He fell for what seemed like an eternity to me, finally cutting smoothly into the dark gray waves below.

“Wow. It’s so high.” I slid back into my seat, still staring wide-eyed at the two remaining divers. “It must be a hundred feet.”

“Well, yeah, most of us jump from lower down, that rock that juts out from the cliff about halfway.” He pointed out his window. The place he indicated did seem much more reasonable. “Those guys are insane. Probably showing off how tough they are. I mean, really, it’s freezing today. That water can’t feel good.” He made a disgruntled face, as if the stunt personally offended him. It surprised me a little. I would have thought Jacob was nearly impossible to upset.

“You jump off the cliff?” I hadn’t missed the “us.”

“Sure, sure.” He shrugged and grinned. “It’s fun. A little scary, kind of a rush.”

I looked back at the cliffs, where the third figure was pacing the edge. I’d never witnessed anything so reckless in all my life. My eyes widened, and I smiled. “Jake, you have to take me cliff diving.”

He frowned back at me, his face disapproving. “Bella, you just wanted to call an ambulance for Sam,” he reminded me. I was surprised that he could tell who it was from this distance.

“I want to try,” I insisted, starting to get out of the car again.

Jacob grabbed my wrist. “Not today, all right? Can we at least wait for a warmer day?”

“Okay, fine,” I agreed. With the door open, the glacial breeze was raising goose bumps on my arm. “But I want to go soon.”

“Soon.” He rolled his eyes. “Sometimes you’re a little strange, Bella. Do you know that?”

I sighed. “Yes.”

"And we're not jumping off the top."

I watched, fascinated, as the third boy made a running start and flung himself farther into the empty air than the other two. He twisted and cartwheeled through space as he fell, like he was skydiving. He looked absolutely free—unthinking and utterly irresponsible.

"Fine," I agreed. "Not the first time, anyway."

Now Jacob sighed.

"Are we going to try out the bikes or not?" he demanded.

"Okay, okay," I said, tearing my eyes away from the last person waiting on the cliff. I put my seat belt back on and closed the door. The engine was still running, roaring as it idled. We started down the road again.

"So who were those guys—the crazy ones?" I wondered.

He made a disgusted sound in the back of his throat. "The La Push gang."

"You have a gang?" I asked. I realized that I sounded impressed.

He laughed once at my reaction. "Not like that. I swear, they're like hall monitors gone bad. They don't start fights, they keep the peace." He snorted. "There was this guy from up somewhere by the Makah rez, big guy too, scary-looking. Well, word got around that he was selling meth to kids, and Sam Uley and his disciples ran him off our land. They're all about our land, and tribe pride…it's getting ridiculous. The

worst part is that the council takes them seriously. Embry said that the council actually meets with Sam." He shook his head, face full of resentment. "Embry also heard from Leah Clearwater that they call themselves 'protectors' or something like that."

Jacob's hands were clenched into fists, as if he'd like to hit something. I'd never seen this side of him.

I was surprised to hear Sam Uley's name. I didn't want it to bring back the images from my nightmare, so I made a quick observation to distract myself. "You don't like them very much."

"Does it show?" he asked sarcastically.

"Well…It doesn't sound like they're doing anything bad." I tried to soothe him, to make him cheerful again. "Just sort of annoyingly goody-two-shoes for a gang."

"Yeah. Annoying is a good word. They're always showing off—like the cliff thing. They act like…like, I don't know. Like tough guys. I was hanging out at the store with Embry and Quil once, last semester, and Sam came by with his followers, Jared and Paul. Quil said something, you know how he's got a big mouth, and it pissed Paul off. His eyes got all dark, and he sort of smiled—no, he showed his teeth but he didn't smile—and it was like he was so mad he was shaking or something. But Sam put his hand against Paul's chest and shook his head. Paul looked at him for a minute and calmed down. Honestly, it was like Sam was holding him back—like Paul was going to tear us up if Sam didn't stop him." He groaned. "Like a bad western. You know, Sam's a pretty big guy, he's twenty. But Paul's just sixteen, too, shorter than me and not as beefy as Quil. I think any one of us could take him."

"Tough guys," I agreed. I could see it in my head as he described it, and it reminded me of something…a trio of tall, dark men standing very still and close together in my father's living room. The picture was sideways, because my head was lying against the couch while Dr. Gerandy and Charlie leaned over me….Had that been Sam's gang?

I spoke quickly again to divert myself from the bleak memories. "Isn't Sam a little too old for this kind of thing?"

"Yeah. He was supposed to go to college, but he stayed. And no one gave him any crap about it, either. The whole council pitched a fit when my sister turned down a partial scholarship and got married. But, oh no, Sam Uley can do no wrong."

His face was set in unfamiliar lines of outrage—outrage and something else I didn't recognize at first.

"It all sounds really annoying and…strange. But I don't get why you're taking it so personally." I peeked over at his face, hoping I hadn't offended him. He was suddenly calm, staring out the side window.

"You just missed the turn," he said in an even voice.

I executed a very wide U-turn, nearly hitting a tree as my circle ran the truck halfway off the road.

"Thanks for the heads-up," I muttered as I started up the side road.

"Sorry, I wasn't paying attention."

It was quiet for a brief minute.

"You can stop anywhere along here," he said softly.

I pulled over and cut the engine. My ears rang in the silence that followed. We both got out, and Jacob headed around to the back to get the bikes. I tried to read his expression. Something more was bothering him. I'd hit a nerve.

He smiled halfheartedly as he pushed the red bike to my side. "Happy late birthday. Are you ready for this?"

"I think so." The bike suddenly looked intimidating, frightening, as I realized I would soon be astride it.

"We'll take it slow," he promised. I gingerly leaned the motorcycle against the truck's fender while he went to get his.

"Jake . . ." I hesitated as he came back around the truck.

"Yeah?"

"What's really bothering you? About the Sam thing, I mean? Is there something else?" I watched his face. He grimaced, but he didn't seem angry. He looked at the dirt and kicked his shoe against the front tire of his bike again and again, like he was keeping time.

He sighed. "It's just...the way they treat me. It creeps me out." The words started to rush out now. "You know, the council is supposed to be made up of equals, but if there was a leader, it would be my dad. I've never been able to figure out why people treat him the way they do. Why his opinion counts the most. It's got something to do with his father and his father's father. My great-grandpa, Ephraim Black, was sort of the last chief we had, and they still listen to Billy, maybe because of that.

"But I'm just like everyone else. Nobody treats me special…until now."

That caught me off guard. "Sam treats you special?"

"Yeah," he agreed, looking up at me with troubled eyes. "He looks at me like he's waiting for something…like I'm going to join his stupid gang someday. He pays more attention to me than any of the other guys. I hate it."

"You don't have to join anything." My voice was angry. This was really upsetting Jacob, and that infuriated me. Who did these "protectors" think they were?

"Yeah." His foot kept up its rhythm against the tire.

"What?" I could tell there was more.

He frowned, his eyebrows pulling up in a way that looked sad and worried rather than angry. "It's Embry. He's been avoiding me lately."

The thoughts didn't seem connected, but I wondered if I was to blame for the problems with his friend. "You've been hanging out with me a lot," I reminded him, feeling selfish. I'd been monopolizing him.

"No, that's not it. It's not just me—it's Quil, too, and everyone. Embry missed a week of school, but he was never home when we tried to see him. And when he came back, he looked…he looked freaked out. Terrified. Quil and I both tried to get him to tell us what was wrong, but he wouldn't talk to either one of us."

I stared at Jacob, biting my lip anxiously—he was really frightened. But he didn't look at me. He

watched his own foot kicking the rubber as if it belonged to someone else. The tempo increased.

“Then this week, out of nowhere, Embry’s hanging out with Sam and the rest of them. He was out on the cliffs today.” His voice was low and tense.

He finally looked at me. “Bella, they bugged him even more than they bother me. He didn’t want anything to do with them. And now Embry’s following Sam around like he’s joined a cult.

“And that’s the way it was with Paul. Just exactly the same. He wasn’t friends with Sam at all. Then he stopped coming to school for a few weeks, and, when he came back, suddenly Sam owned him. I don’t know what it means. I can’t figure it out, and I feel like I have to, because Embry’s my friend and…Sam’s looking at me funny…and . . .” He trailed off.

“Have you talked to Billy about this?” I asked. His horror was spreading to me. I had chills running on the back of my neck.

Now there was anger on his face. “Yes,” he snorted. “That was helpful.”

“What did he say?”

Jacob’s expression was sarcastic, and when he spoke, his voice mocked the deep tones of his father’s voice. “It’s nothing you need to worry about now, Jacob. In a few years, if you don’t…well, I’ll explain later.” And then his voice was his own. “What am I supposed to get from that? Is he trying to say it’s some stupid puberty, coming-of-age thing? This is something else. Something wrong.”

He was biting his lower lip and clenching his hands. He looked like he was about to cry.

I threw my arms around him instinctively, wrapping them around his waist and pressing my face against his chest. He was so big, I felt like I was a child hugging a grown-up.

“Oh, Jake, it’ll be okay!” I promised. “If it gets worse you can come live with me and Charlie. Don’t be scared, we’ll think of something!”

He was frozen for a second, and then his long arms wrapped hesitantly around me. “Thanks, Bella.” His voice was huskier than usual.

We stood like that for a moment, and it didn’t upset me; in fact, I felt comforted by the contact. This didn’t feel anything like the last time someone had embraced me this way. This was friendship. And Jacob was very warm.

It was strange for me, being this close—emotionally rather than physically, though the physical was strange for me, too—to another human being. It wasn’t my usual style. I didn’t normally relate to people so easily, on such a basic level.

Not human beings.

“If this is how you’re going to react, I’ll freak out more often.” Jacob’s voice was light, normal again, and his laughter rumbled against my ear. His fingers touched my hair, soft and tentative.

Well, it was friendship for me.

I pulled away quickly, laughing with him, but determined to put things back in perspective at once.

"It's hard to believe I'm two years older than you," I said, emphasizing the word older. "You make me feel like a dwarf." Standing this close to him, I really had to crane my neck to see his face.

"You're forgetting I'm in my forties, of course."

"Oh, that's right."

He patted my head. "You're like a little doll," he teased. "A porcelain doll."

I rolled my eyes, taking another step away. "Let's not start with the albino cracks."

"Seriously, Bella, are you sure you're not?" He stretched his russet arm out next to mine. The difference wasn't flattering. "I've never seen anyone paler than you…well, except for—" He broke off, and I looked away, trying to not understand what he had been about to say.

"So are we going to ride or what?"

"Let's do it," I agreed, more enthusiastic than I would have been half a minute ago. His unfinished sentence reminded me of why I was here.

# Chapter 8
## ADRENALINE

“Okay, where's your clutch?”

I pointed to the lever on my left handlebar. Letting go of the grip was a mistake. The heavy bike wobbled underneath me, threatening to knock me sidewise. I grabbed the handle again, trying to hold it straight.

“Jacob, it won’t stay up,” I complained.

“It will when you’re moving,” he promised. “Now where’s your brake?”

“Behind my right foot.”

“Wrong.”

He grabbed my right hand and curled my fingers around the lever over the throttle.

“But you said—”

“This is the brake you want. Don’t use the back brake now, that’s for later, when you know what you’re doing.”

“That doesn’t sound right,” I said suspiciously. “Aren’t both brakes kind of important?”

“Forget the back brake, okay? Here—” He wrapped his hand around mine and made me squeeze the lever down. “That is how you brake. Don’t forget.” He squeezed my hand another time.

“Fine,” I agreed.

"Throttle?"

I twisted the right grip.

"Gearshift?"

I nudged it with my left calf.

"Very good. I think you've got all the parts down. Now you just have to get it moving."

"Uh-huh," I muttered, afraid to say more. My stomach was contorting strangely and I thought my voice might crack. I was terrified. I tried to tell myself that the fear was pointless. I'd already lived through the worst thing possible. In comparison with that, why should anything frighten me now? I should be able to look death in the face and laugh.

My stomach wasn't buying it.

I stared down the long stretch of dirt road, bordered by thick misty green on every side. The road was sandy and damp. Better than mud.

"I want you to hold down the clutch," Jacob instructed.

I wrapped my fingers around the clutch.

"Now this is crucial, Bella," Jacob stressed. "Don't let go of that, okay? I want you to pretend that I've handed you a live grenade. The pin is out and you are holding down the spoon."

I squeezed tighter.

"Good. Do you think you can kick-start it?"

"If I move my foot, I will fall over," I told him through gritted teeth, my fingers tight around my live grenade.

"Okay, I'll do it. Don't let go of the clutch."

He took a step back, and then suddenly slammed his foot down on the pedal. There was a short ripping noise, and the force of his thrust rocked the bike. I started to fall sideways, but Jake caught the bike before it knocked me to the ground.

"Steady there," he encouraged. "Do you still have the clutch?"

"Yes," I gasped.

"Plant your feet—I'm going to try again." But he put his hand on the back of the seat, too, just to be safe.

It took four more kicks before the ignition caught. I could feel the bike rumbling beneath me like an angry animal. I gripped the clutch until my fingers ached.

"Try out the throttle," he suggested. "Very lightly. And don't let go of the clutch."

Hesitantly, I twisted the right handle. Though the movement was tiny, the bike snarled beneath me. It sounded angry and hungry now. Jacob smiled in deep satisfaction.

"Do you remember how to put it into first gear?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Well, go ahead and do it."

"Okay."

He waited for a few seconds.

“Left foot,” he prompted.

“I know,” I said, taking a deep breath.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Jacob asked. “You look scared.”

“I’m fine,” I snapped. I kicked the gearshift down one notch.

“Very good,” he praised me. “Now, very gently, ease up on the clutch.”

He took a step away from the bike.

“You want me to let go of the grenade?” I asked in disbelief. No wonder he was moving back.

“That’s how you move, Bella. Just do it little by little.”

As I began to loosen my grip, I was shocked to be interrupted by a voice that did not belong to the boy standing next to me.

“This is reckless and childish and idiotic, Bella,” the velvet voice fumed.

“Oh!” I gasped, and my hand fell off the clutch.

The bike bucked under me, yanking me forward and then collapsing to the ground half on top of me. The growling engine choked to a stop.

“Bella?” Jacob jerked the heavy bike off me with ease. “Are you hurt?”

But I wasn’t listening.

“I told you so,” the perfect voice murmured, crystal clear.

“Bella?” Jacob shook my shoulder.

“I’m fine,” I mumbled, dazed.

More than fine. The voice in my head was back. It still rang in my ears—soft, velvety echoes.

My mind ran swiftly through the possibilities. There was no familiarity here—on a road I’d never seen, doing something I’d never done before—no déjà vu. So the hallucinations must be triggered by something else….I felt the adrenaline coursing through my veins again, and I thought I had the answer. Some combination of adrenaline and danger, or maybe just stupidity.

Jacob was pulling me to my feet.

“Did you hit your head?” he asked.

“I don’t think so.” I shook it back and forth, checking. “I didn’t hurt the bike, did I?” This thought worried me. I was anxious to try again, right away. Being reckless was paying off better than I’d thought. Forget cheating. Maybe I’d found a way to generate the hallucinations—that was much more important.

“No. You just stalled the engine,” Jacob said, interrupting my quick speculations. “You let go of the clutch too fast.”

I nodded. “Let’s try again.”

“Are you sure?” Jacob asked.

“Positive.”

This time I tried to get the kick-start myself. It was complicated; I had to jump a little to slam down on the pedal with enough force, and every time I did that, the bike tried to knock me over. Jacob's hand hovered over the handlebars, ready to catch me if I needed him.

It took several good tries, and even more poor tries, before the engine caught and roared to life under me. Remembering to hold on to the grenade, I revved the throttle experimentally. It snarled at the slightest touch. My smile mirrored Jacob's now.

"Easy on the clutch," he reminded me.

"Do you want to kill yourself, then? Is that what this is about?" the other voice spoke again, his tone severe.

I smiled tightly—it was still working—and ignored the questions. Jacob wasn't going to let anything serious happen to me.

"Go home to Charlie," the voice ordered. The sheer beauty of it amazed me. I couldn't allow my memory to lose it, no matter the price.

"Ease off slowly," Jacob encouraged me.

"I will," I said. It bothered me a bit when I realized I was answering both of them.

The voice in my head growled against the roar of the motorcycle.

Trying to focus this time, to not let the voice startle me again, I relaxed my hand by tiny degrees. Suddenly, the gear caught and wrenched me forward.

And I was flying.

There was wind that wasn't there before, blowing my skin against my skull and flinging my hair back behind me with enough force that it felt like someone was tugging on it. I'd left my stomach back at the starting point; the adrenaline coursed through my body, tingling in my veins. The trees raced past me, blurring into a wall of green.

But this was only first gear. My foot itched toward the gearshift as I twisted for more gas.

"No, Bella!" the angry, honey-sweet voice ordered in my ear. "Watch what you're doing!"

It distracted me enough from the speed to realize that the road was starting a slow curve to the left, and I was still going straight. Jacob hadn't told me how to turn.

"Brakes, brakes," I muttered to myself, and I instinctively slammed down with my right foot, like I would in my truck.

The bike was suddenly unstable underneath me, shivering first to one side and then the other. It was dragging me toward the green wall, and I was going too fast. I tried to turn the handlebar the other direction, and the sudden shift of my weight pushed the bike toward the ground, still spinning toward the trees.

The motorcycle landed on top of me again, roaring loudly, pulling me across the wet sand until it hit something stationary. I couldn't see. My face was mashed into the moss. I tried to lift my head, but there was something in the way.

I was dizzy and confused. It sounded like there were three things snarling—the bike over me, the voice in my head, and something else....

“Bella!” Jacob yelled, and I heard the roar of the other bike cut off.

The motorcycle no longer pinned me to the ground, and I rolled over to breathe. All the growling went silent.

“Wow,” I murmured. I was thrilled. This had to be it, the recipe for a hallucination—adrenaline plus danger plus stupidity. Something close to that, anyway.

“Bella!” Jacob was crouching over me anxiously. “Bella, are you alive?”

“I’m great!” I enthused. I flexed my arms and legs. Everything seemed to be working correctly. “Let’s do it again.”

“I don’t think so.” Jacob still sounded worried. “I think I’d better drive you to the hospital first.”

“I’m fine.”

“Um, Bella? You’ve got a huge cut on your forehead, and it’s gushing blood,” he informed me.

I clapped my hand over my head. Sure enough, it was wet and sticky. I could smell nothing but the damp moss on my face, and that held off the nausea.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Jacob.” I pushed hard against the gash, as if I could force the blood back inside my head.

“Why are you apologizing for bleeding?” he wondered as he wrapped a long arm around my waist and pulled me to my feet. “Let’s go. I’ll drive.” He held out his hand for the keys.

“What about the bikes?” I asked, handing them over.

He thought for a second. “Wait here. And take this.” He pulled off his T-shirt, already spotted with blood, and threw it to me. I wadded it up and held it tightly to my forehead. I was starting to smell the blood; I breathed deeply through my mouth and tried to concentrate on something else.

Jacob jumped on the black motorcycle, kicked it to a start in one try, and raced back down the road, spraying sand and pebbles behind him. He looked athletic and professional as he leaned over the handlebars, head low, face forward, his shiny hair whipping against the russet skin of his back. My eyes narrowed enviously. I was sure I hadn’t looked like that on my motorcycle.

I was surprised at how far I’d gone. I could barely see Jacob in the distance when he finally got to the truck. He threw the bike into the bed and sprinted to the driver’s side.

I really didn’t feel bad at all as he coaxed my truck to a deafening roar in his hurry to get back to me. My head stung a little, and my stomach was uneasy, but the cut wasn’t serious. Head wounds just bled more than most. His urgency wasn’t necessary.

Jacob left the truck running as he raced back to me, wrapping his arm around my waist again.

“Okay, let’s get you in the truck.”

"I'm honestly fine," I assured him as he helped me in. "Don't get worked up. It's just a little blood."

"Just a lot of blood," I heard him mutter as he went back for my bike.

"Now, let's think about this for a second," I began when he got back in. "If you take me to the ER like this, Charlie is sure to hear about it." I glanced down at the sand and dirt caked into my jeans.

"Bella, I think you need stitches. I'm not going to let you bleed to death."

"I won't," I promised. "Let's just take the bikes back first, and then we'll make a stop at my house so I can dispose of the evidence before we go to the hospital."

"What about Charlie?"

"He said he had to work today."

"Are you really sure?"

"Trust me. I'm an easy bleeder. It's not nearly as dire as it looks."

Jacob wasn't happy—his full mouth turned down in an uncharacteristic frown—but he didn't want to get me in trouble. I stared out the window, holding his ruined shirt to my head, while he drove me to Forks.

The motorcycle was better than I'd dreamed. It had served its original purpose. I'd cheated—broken my promise. I'd been needlessly reckless. I felt a little less pathetic now that the promises had been broken on both sides.

And then to discover the key to the hallucinations! At least, I hoped I had. I was going to test the theory as soon as possible. Maybe they'd get through with me quickly in the ER, and I could try again tonight.

Racing down the road like that had been amazing. The feel of the wind in my face, the speed and the freedom…it reminded me of a past life, flying through the thick forest without a road, piggyback while he ran—I stopped thinking right there, letting the memory break off in the sudden agony. I flinched.

“You still okay?” Jacob checked.

“Yeah.” I tried to sound as convincing as before.

“By the way,” he added. “I'm going to disconnect your foot brake tonight.”

At home, I went to look at myself in the mirror first thing; it was pretty gruesome. Blood was drying in thick streaks across my cheek and neck, matting in my muddy hair. I examined myself clinically, pretending the blood was paint so it wouldn't upset my stomach. I breathed through my mouth, and was fine.

I washed up as well as I could. Then I hid my dirty, bloody clothes in the bottom of my laundry basket, putting on new jeans and a button-up shirt (that I didn't have to pull over my head) as carefully as I could. I managed to do this one-handed and keep both garments blood-free.

“Hurry up,” Jacob called.

“Okay, okay,” I shouted back. After making sure I left nothing incriminating behind me, I headed downstairs.

"How do I look?" I asked him.

"Better," he admitted.

"But do I look like I tripped in your garage and hit my head on a hammer?"

"Sure, I guess so."

"Let's go then."

Jacob hurried me out the door, and insisted on driving again. We were halfway to the hospital when I realized he was still shirtless.

I frowned guiltily. "We should have grabbed you a jacket."

"That would have given us away," he teased. "Besides, it's not cold."

"Are you kidding?" I shivered and reached out to turn the heat on.

I watched Jacob to see if he was just playing tough so I wouldn't worry, but he looked comfortable enough. He had one arm over the back of my seat, though I was huddled up to keep warm.

Jacob really did look older than sixteen—not quite forty, but maybe older than me. Quil didn't have too much on him in the muscle department, for all that Jacob claimed to be a skeleton. The muscles were the long wiry kind, but they were definitely there under the smooth skin. His skin was such a pretty color, it made me jealous.

Jacob noticed my scrutiny.

“What?” he asked, suddenly self-conscious.

“Nothing. I just hadn’t realized before. Did you know, you’re sort of beautiful?”

Once the words slipped out, I worried that he might take my impulsive observation the wrong way.

But Jacob just rolled his eyes. “You hit your head pretty hard, didn’t you?”

“I’m serious.”

“Well, then, thanks. Sort of.”

I grinned. “You’re sort of welcome.”

I had to have seven stitches to close the cut on my forehead. After the sting of the local anesthetic, there was no pain in the procedure. Jacob held my hand while Dr. Snow was sewing, and I tried not to think about why that was ironic.

We were at the hospital forever. By the time I was done, I had to drop Jacob off at his home and hurry back to cook dinner for Charlie. Charlie seemed to buy my story about falling in Jacob’s garage. After all, it wasn’t like I hadn’t been able to land myself in the ER before with no more help than my own feet.

This night was not as bad as that first night, after I’d heard the perfect voice in Port Angeles. The hole came back, the way it always did when I was away from Jacob, but it didn’t throb so badly around the edges. I was already planning ahead, looking forward to more delusions, and that was a distraction. Also, I knew I would feel better tomorrow when I was with Jacob again. That made the empty hole and the familiar pain easier to bear; relief was in sight. The nightmare,

too, had lost a little of its potency. I was horrified by the nothingness, as always, but I was also strangely impatient as I waited for the moment that would send me screaming into consciousness. I knew the nightmare had to end.

The next Wednesday, before I could get home from the ER, Dr. Gerandy called to warn my father that I might possibly have a concussion and advised him to wake me up every two hours through the night to make sure it wasn't serious. Charlie's eyes narrowed suspiciously at my weak explanation about tripping again.

"Maybe you should just stay out of the garage altogether, Bella," he suggested that night during dinner.

I panicked, worried that Charlie was about to lay down some kind of edict that would prohibit La Push, and consequently my motorcycle. And I wasn't giving it up—I'd had the most amazing hallucination today. My velvet-voiced delusion had yelled at me for almost five minutes before I'd hit the brake too abruptly and launched myself into the tree. I'd take whatever pain that would cause me tonight without complaint.

"This didn't happen in the garage," I protested quickly. "We were hiking, and I tripped over a rock."

"Since when do you hike?" Charlie asked skeptically.

"Working at Newton's was bound to rub off sometime," I pointed out. "Spend every day selling all the virtues of the outdoors, eventually you get curious."

Charlie glared at me, unconvinced.

"I'll be more careful," I promised, surreptitiously crossing my fingers under the table.

"I don't mind you hiking right there around La Push, but keep close to town, okay?"

"Why?"

"Well, we've been getting a lot of wildlife complaints lately. The forestry department is going to check into it, but for the time being . . ."

"Oh, the big bear," I said with sudden comprehension. "Yeah, some of the hikers coming through Newton's have seen it. Do you think there's really some giant mutated grizzly out there?"

His forehead creased. "There's something. Keep it close to town, okay?"

"Sure, sure," I said quickly. He didn't look completely appeased.

"Charlie's getting nosy," I complained to Jacob when I picked him up after school Friday.

"Maybe we should cool it with the bikes." He saw my objecting expression and added, "At least for a week or so. You could stay out of the hospital for a week, right?"

"What are we going to do?" I griped.

He smiled cheerfully. "What ever you want."

I thought about that for a minute—about what I wanted.

I hated the idea of losing even my brief seconds of closeness with the memories that didn't hurt—the ones that came on their own, without me thinking of them consciously. If I couldn't have the bikes, I was going to have to find some other avenue to the danger and the adrenaline, and that was going to take serious thought and creativity. Doing nothing in the meantime was not appealing. Suppose I got depressed again, even with Jake? I had to keep occupied.

Maybe there was some other way, some other recipe… some other place.

The house had been a mistake, certainly. But his presence must be stamped somewhere, somewhere other than inside me. There had to be a place where he seemed more real than among all the familiar landmarks that were crowded with other human memories.

I could think of one place where that might hold true. One place that would always belong to him and no one else. A magic place, full of light. The beautiful meadow I'd seen only once in my life, lit by sunshine and the sparkle of his skin.

This idea had a huge potential for backfiring—it might be dangerously painful. My chest ached with emptiness even to think of it. It was hard to hold myself upright, to not give myself away. But surely, there of all places, I could hear his voice. And I already told Charlie I was hiking….

"What are you thinking about so hard?" Jacob asked.

"Well…," I began slowly. "I found this place in the forest once—I came across it when I was, um, hiking. A little meadow, the most beautiful place. I don't

know if I could track it down again on my own. It would definitely take a few tries....”

“We could use a compass and a grid pattern,” Jacob said with confident helpfulness. “Do you know where you started from?”

“Yes, just below the trailhead where the one-ten ends. I was going mostly south, I think.”

“Cool. We’ll find it.” As always, Jacob was game for anything I wanted. No matter how strange it was.

So, Saturday afternoon, I tied on my new hiking boots—purchased that morning using my twenty-percent-off employee discount for the first time—grabbed my new topographical map of the Olympic Peninsula, and drove to La Push.

We didn’t get started immediately; first, Jacob sprawled across the living room floor—taking up the whole room—and, for a full twenty minutes, drew a complicated web across the key section of the map while I perched on a kitchen chair and talked to Billy. Billy didn’t seem at all concerned about our proposed hiking trip. I was surprised that Jacob had told him where we were going, given the fuss people were making about the bear sightings. I wanted to ask Billy not to say anything about this to Charlie, but I was afraid that making the request would cause the opposite result.

“Maybe we’ll see the super bear,” Jacob joked, eyes on his design.

I glanced at Billy swiftly, fearing a Charlie-style reaction.

But Billy just laughed at his son. “Maybe you should take a jar of honey, just in case.”

Jake chuckled. “Hope your new boots are fast, Bella. One little jar isn’t going to keep a hungry bear occupied for long.”

“I only have to be faster than you.”

“Good luck with that!” Jacob said, rolling his eyes as he refolded the map. “Let’s go.”

“Have fun,” Billy rumbled, wheeling himself toward the refrigerator.

Charlie was not a hard person to live with, but it looked to me like Jacob had it even easier than I did.

I drove to the very end of the dirt road, stopping near the sign that marked the beginning of the trailhead. It had been a long time since I’d been here, and my stomach reacted nervously. This might be a very bad thing. But it would be worth it, if I got to hear him.

I got out and looked at the dense wall of green.

“I went this way,” I murmured, pointing straight ahead.

“Hmm,” Jake muttered.

“What?”

He looked at the direction I’d pointed, then at the clearly marked trail, and back.

“I would have figured you for a trail kind of girl.”

“Not me.” I smiled bleakly. “I’m a rebel.”

He laughed, and then pulled out our map.

“Give me a second.” He held the compass in a skilled way, twisting the map around till it angled the way he wanted.

“Okay—first line on the grid. Let’s do it.”

I could tell that I was slowing Jacob up, but he didn’t complain. I tried not to dwell on my last trip through this part of the forest, with a very different companion. Normal memories were still dangerous. If I let myself slip up, I’d end up with my arms clutching my chest to hold it together, gasping for air, and how would I explain that to Jacob?

It wasn’t as hard as I would have thought to keep focused on the present. The forest looked a lot like any other part of the peninsula, and Jacob set a vastly different mood.

He whistled cheerfully, an unfamiliar tune, swinging his arms and moving easily through the rough undergrowth. The shadows didn’t seem as dark as usual. Not with my personal sun along.

Jacob checked the compass every few minutes, keeping us in a straight line with one of the radiating spokes of his grid. He really looked like he knew what he was doing. I was going to compliment him, but I caught myself. No doubt he’d add another few years to his inflated age.

My mind wandered as I walked, and I grew curious. I hadn’t forgotten the conversation we’d had by the sea cliffs—I’d been waiting for him to bring it up again, but it didn’t look like that was going to happen.

“Hey…Jake?” I asked hesitantly.

"Yeah?"

"How are things…with Embry? Is he back to normal yet?"

Jacob was silent for a minute, still moving forward with long paces. When he was about ten feet ahead, he stopped to wait for me.

"No. He's not back to normal," Jacob said when I reached him, his mouth pulling down at the corners. He didn't start walking again. I immediately regretted bringing it up.

"Still with Sam."

"Yup."

He put his arm around my shoulder, and he looked so troubled that I didn't playfully shake it off, as I might have otherwise.

"Are they still looking at you funny?" I half-whispered.

Jacob stared through the trees. "Sometimes."

"And Billy?"

"As helpful as ever," he said in a sour, angry voice that disturbed me.

"Our couch is always open," I offered.

He laughed, breaking out of the unnatural gloom. "But think of the position that would put Charlie in—when Billy calls the police to report my kidnapping."

I laughed too, glad to have Jacob back to normal.

We stopped when Jacob said we'd gone six miles, cut west for a short time, and headed back along another line of his grid. Everything looked exactly the same as the way in, and I had a feeling that my silly quest was pretty much doomed. I admitted as much when it started to get darker, the sunless day fading toward a starless night, but Jacob was more confident.

"As long as you're sure we're starting from the right place . . ." He glanced down at me.

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Then we'll find it," he promised, grabbing my hand and pulling me through a mass of ferns. On the other side was the truck. He gestured toward it proudly. "Trust me."

"You're good," I admitted. "Next time we bring flashlights, though."

"We'll save hiking for Sundays from now on. I didn't know you were that slow."

I yanked my hand back and stomped around to the driver's side while he chuckled at my reaction.

"So you up for another try tomorrow?" he asked, sliding into the passenger seat.

"Sure. Unless you want to go without me so I don't tie you down to my gimpy pace."

"I'll survive," he assured me. "If we're hiking again, though, you might want to pick up some moleskin. I bet you can feel those new boots right now."

"A little," I confessed. It felt like I had more blisters than I had space to fit them.

"I hope we see the bear tomorrow. I'm sort of disappointed about that."

"Yes, me, too," I agreed sarcastically. "Maybe we'll get lucky tomorrow and something will eat us!"

"Bears don't want to eat people. We don't taste that good." He grinned at me in the dark cab. "Of course, you might be an exception. I bet you'd taste good."

"Thanks so much," I said, looking away. He wasn't the first person to tell me that.

# Chapter 9

## THIRD WHEEL

Time began to trip along much more quickly than before. School, work, and Jacob—though not necessarily in that order—created a neat and effortless pattern to follow. And Charlie got his wish: I wasn't miserable anymore. Of course, I couldn't fool myself completely. When I stopped to take stock of my life, which I tried not to do too often, I couldn't ignore the implications of my behavior.

I was like a lost moon—my planet destroyed in some cataclysmic, disaster-movie scenario of desolation—that continued, nevertheless, to circle in a tight little orbit around the empty space left behind, ignoring the laws of gravity.

I was getting better with my bike, which meant fewer bandages to worry Charlie. But it also meant that the voice in my head began to fade, until I heard it no more. Quietly, I panicked. I threw myself into the search for the meadow with slightly frenzied intensity. I racked my brain for other adrenaline-producing activities.

I didn't keep track of the days that passed—there was no reason, as I tried to live as much in the present as possible, no past fading, no future impending. So I was surprised by the date when Jacob brought it up on one of our homework days. He was waiting when I pulled up in front of his house.

"Happy Valentine's Day," Jacob said, smiling, but ducking his head as he greeted me.

He held out a small, pink box, balancing it on his palm. Conversation hearts.

“Well, I feel like a schmuck,” I mumbled. “Is today Valentine’s Day?”

Jacob shook his head with mock sadness. “You can be so out of it sometimes. Yes, it is the fourteenth day of February. So are you going to be my Valentine? Since you didn’t get me a fifty-cent box of candy, it’s the least you can do.”

I started to feel uncomfortable. The words were teasing, but only on the surface.

“What exactly does that entail?” I hedged.

“The usual—slave for life, that kind of thing.”

“Oh, well, if that’s all . . .” I took the candy. But I was trying to think of some way to make the boundaries clear. Again. They seemed to get blurred a lot with Jacob.

“So, what are we doing tomorrow? Hiking, or the ER?”

“Hiking,” I decided. “You’re not the only one who can be obsessive. I’m starting to think I imagined that place….” I frowned into space.

“We’ll find it,” he assured me. “Bikes Friday?” he offered.

I saw a chance and took it without taking time to think it through.

“I’m going to a movie Friday. I’ve been promising my cafeteria crowd that I would go out forever.” Mike would be pleased.

But Jacob's face fell. I caught the expression in his dark eyes before he dropped them to look at the ground.

"You'll come too, right?" I added quickly. "Or will it be too much of a drag with a bunch of boring seniors?" So much for my chance to put some distance between us. I couldn't stand hurting Jacob; we seemed to be connected in an odd way, and his pain set off little stabs of my own. Also, the idea of having his company for the ordeal—I had promised Mike, but really didn't feel any enthusiasm at the thought of following through—was just too tempting.

"You'd like me to come, with your friends there?"

"Yes," I admitted honestly, knowing as I continued that I was probably shooting myself in the foot with my words. "I'll have a lot more fun if you're there. Bring Quil, and we'll make it a party."

"Quil's gonna freak. Senior girls." He chortled and rolled his eyes. I didn't mention Embry, and neither did he.

I laughed, too. "I'll try to get him a good selection."

I broached the subject with Mike in English.

"Hey, Mike," I said when class was over. "Are you free Friday night?"

He looked up, his blue eyes instantly hopeful. "Yeah, I am. You want to go out?"

I worded my reply carefully. "I was thinking about getting a group"—I emphasized the word—"together to go see Crosshairs." I'd done my homework this time—even reading the movie spoilers to be sure I wouldn't

be caught off guard. This movie was supposed to be a bloodbath from start to finish. I wasn't so recovered that I could stand to sit through a romance. "Does that sound like fun?"

"Sure," he agreed, visibly less eager.

"Cool."

After a second, he perked back up to near his former excitement level. "How about we get Angela and Ben? Or Eric and Katie?"

He was determined to make this some kind of double date, apparently.

"How about both?" I suggested. "And Jessica, too, of course. And Tyler and Conner, and maybe Lauren," I tacked on grudgingly. I had promised Quil variety.

"Okay," Mike muttered, foiled.

"And," I continued, "I've got a couple of friends from La Push I'm inviting. So it sounds like we'll need your Suburban if everyone comes."

Mike's eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"These are the friends you spend all your time studying with now?"

"Yep, the very ones," I answered cheerfully. "Though you could look at it as tutoring—they're only sophomores."

"Oh," Mike said, surprised. After a second of thought, he smiled.

In the end, though, the Suburban wasn't necessary.

Jessica and Lauren claimed to be busy as soon as Mike let it slip that I was involved in the planning. Eric and Katie already had plans—it was their three-week anniversary or something. Lauren got to Tyler and Conner before Mike could, so those two were also busy. Even Quil was out—grounded for fighting at school. In the end, only Angela and Ben, and, of course Jacob, were able to go.

The diminished numbers didn't dampen Mike's anticipation, though. It was all he could talk about Friday.

"Are you sure you don't want to see Tomorrow and Forever instead?" he asked at lunch, naming the current romantic comedy that was ruling the box office. "Rotten Tomatoes gave it a better review."

"I want to see Crosshairs," I insisted. "I'm in the mood for action. Bring on the blood and guts!"

"Okay." Mike turned away, but not before I saw his maybe-she's-crazy-after-all expression.

When I got home from school, a very familiar car was parked in front of my house. Jacob was leaning against the hood, a huge grin lighting up his face.

"No way!" I shouted as I jumped out of the truck. "You're done! I can't believe it! You finished the Rabbit!"

He beamed. "Just last night. This is the maiden voyage."

"Incredible." I held my hand up for a high five.

He smacked his hand against mine, but left it there, twisting his fingers through mine. "So do I get to drive tonight?"

"Definitely," I said, and then I sighed.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm giving up—I can't top this one. So you win. You're oldest."

He shrugged, unsurprised by my capitulation. "Of course I am."

Mike's Suburban chugged around the corner. I pulled my hand out of Jacob's, and he made a face that I wasn't meant to see.

"I remember this guy," he said in a low voice as Mike parked across the street. "The one who thought you were his girlfriend. Is he still confused?"

I raised one eyebrow. "Some people are hard to discourage."

"Then again," Jacob said thoughtfully, "sometimes persistence pays off."

"Most of the time it's just annoying, though."

Mike got out of his car and crossed the road.

"Hey, Bella," he greeted me, and then his eyes turned wary as he looked up at Jacob. I glanced briefly at Jacob, too, trying to be objective. He really didn't look like a sophomore at all. He was just so big—Mike's head barely cleared Jacob's shoulder; I didn't even want to think where I measured next to him—and

then his face was older-looking than it used to be, even a month ago.

“Hey, Mike! Do you remember Jacob Black?”

“Not really.” Mike held out his hand.

“Old family friend,” Jacob introduced himself, shaking hands. They locked hands with more force than necessary. When their grip broke, Mike flexed his fingers.

I heard the phone ringing from the kitchen.

“I’d better get that—it might be Charlie,” I told them, and dashed inside.

It was Ben. Angela was sick with the stomach flu, and he didn’t feel like coming without her. He apologized for bailing on us.

I walked slowly back to the waiting boys, shaking my head. I really hoped Angela would feel better soon, but I had to admit that I was selfishly upset by this development. Just the three of us, Mike and Jacob and me, together for the evening—this had worked out brilliantly, I thought with grim sarcasm.

It didn’t seem like Jake and Mike had made any progress towards friendship in my absence. They were several yards apart, facing away from each other as they waited for me; Mike’s expression was sullen, though Jacob’s was cheerful as always.

“Ang is sick,” I told them glumly. “She and Ben aren’t coming.”

"I guess the flu is making another round. Austin and Conner were out today, too. Maybe we should do this another time," Mike suggested.

Before I could agree, Jacob spoke.

"I'm still up for it. But if you'd rather to stay behind, Mike—"

"No, I'm coming," Mike interrupted. "I was just thinking of Angela and Ben. Let's go." He started toward his Suburban.

"Hey, do you mind if Jacob drives?" I asked. "I told him he could—he just finished his car. He built it from scratch, all by himself," I bragged, proud as a PTA mom with a student on the principal's list.

"Fine," Mike snapped.

"All right, then," Jacob said, as if that settled everything. He seemed more comfortable than anyone else.

Mike climbed in the backseat of the Rabbit with a disgusted expression.

Jacob was his normal sunny self, chattering away until I'd all but forgotten Mike sulking silently in the back.

And then Mike changed his strategy. He leaned forward, resting his chin on the shoulder of my seat; his cheek almost touched mine. I shifted away, turning my back toward the window.

"Doesn't the radio work in this thing?" Mike asked with a hint of petulance, interrupting Jacob mid-sentence.

"Yes," Jacob answered. "But Bella doesn't like music."

I stared at Jacob, surprised. I'd never told him that.

"Bella?" Mike asked, annoyed.

"He's right," I mumbled, still looking at Jacob's serene profile.

"How can you not like music?" Mike demanded.

I shrugged. "I don't know. It just irritates me."

"Hmph." Mike leaned away.

When we got to the theater, Jacob handed me a ten-dollar bill.

"What's this?" I objected.

"I'm not old enough to get into this one," he reminded me.

I laughed out loud. "So much for relative ages. Is Billy going to kill me if I sneak you in?"

"No. I told him you were planning to corrupt my youthful innocence."

I snickered, and Mike quickened his pace to keep up with us.

I almost wished that Mike had decided to bow out. He was still sullen—not much of an addition to the party. But I didn't want to end up on a date alone with Jacob, either. That wouldn't help anything.

The movie was exactly what it professed to be. In just the opening credits, four people got blown up and one

got beheaded. The girl in front of me put her hands over her eyes and turned her face into her date's chest. He patted her shoulder, and winced occasionally, too. Mike didn't look like he was watching. His face was stiff as he glared toward the fringe of curtain above the screen.

I settled in to endure the two hours, watching the colors and the movement on the screen rather than seeing the shapes of people and cars and houses. But then Jacob started sniggering.

"What?" I whispered.

"Oh, c'mon!" he hissed back. "The blood squirted twenty feet out of that guy. How fake can you get?"

He chuckled again, as a flagpole speared another man into a concrete wall.

After that, I really watched the show, laughing with him as the mayhem got more and more ridiculous. How was I ever going to fight the blurring lines in our relationship when I enjoyed being with him so much?

Both Jacob and Mike had claimed the armrests on either side of me. Both of their hands rested lightly, palms up, in an unnatural looking position. Like steel bear traps, open and ready. Jacob was in the habit of taking my hand whenever the opportunity presented itself, but here in the darkened movie theater, with Mike watching, it would have a different significance—and I was sure he knew that. I couldn't believe that Mike was thinking the same thing, but his hand was placed exactly like Jacob's.

I folded my arms tightly across my chest and hoped that both their hands fell asleep.

Mike gave up first. About halfway through the movie, he pulled his arm back, and leaned forward to put his head in his hands. At first I thought he was reacting to something on the screen, but then he moaned.

“Mike, are you okay?” I whispered.

The couple in front of us turned to look at him as he groaned again.

“No,” he gasped. “I think I’m sick.”

I could see the sheen of sweat across his face in the light from the screen.

Mike groaned again, and bolted for the door. I got up to follow him, and Jacob copied me immediately.

“No, stay,” I whispered. “I’ll make sure he’s okay.”

Jacob came with me anyway.

“You don’t have to come. Get your eight bucks worth of carnage,” I insisted as we walked up the aisle.

“That’s okay. You sure can pick them, Bella. This movie really sucks.” His voice rose from a whisper to its normal pitch as we walked out of the theater.

There was no sign of Mike in the hallway, and I was glad then that Jacob had come with me—he ducked into the men’s bathroom to check for him there.

Jacob was back in a few seconds.

“Oh, he’s in there, all right,” he said, rolling his eyes. “What a marshmallow. You should hold out for someone with a stronger stomach. Someone who laughs at the gore that makes weaker men vomit.”

"I'll keep my eyes open for someone like that."

We were all alone in the hallway. Both theaters were halfway through the movie, and it was deserted—quiet enough for us to hear the popcorn popping at the concession counter in the lobby.

Jacob went to sit on the velveteen-upholstered bench against the wall, patting the space beside him.

"He sounded like he was going to be in there for a while," he said, stretching his long legs out in front of him as he settled in to wait.

I joined him with a sigh. He looked like he was thinking about blurring more lines. Sure enough, as soon as I sat down, he shifted over to put his arm around my shoulders.

"Jake," I protested, leaning away. He dropped his arm, not looking bothered at all by the minor rejection. He reached out and took my hand firmly, wrapping his other hand around my wrist when I tried to pull away again. Where did he get the confidence from?

"Now, just hold on a minute, Bella," he said in a calm voice. "Tell me something."

I grimaced. I didn't want to do this. Not just not now, but not ever. There was nothing left in my life at this point that was more important than Jacob Black. But he seemed determined to ruin everything.

"What?" I muttered sourly.

"You like me, right?"

"You know I do."

"Better than that joker puking his guts out in there?" He gestured toward the bathroom door.

"Yes," I sighed.

"Better than any of the other guys you know?" He was calm, serene—as if my answer didn't matter, or he already knew what it was.

"Better than the girls, too," I pointed out.

"But that's all," he said, and it wasn't a question.

It was hard to answer, to say the word. Would he get hurt and avoid me? How would I stand that?

"Yes," I whispered.

He grinned down at me. "That's okay, you know. As long as you like me the best. And you think I'm good-looking—sort of. I'm prepared to be annoyingly persistent."

"I'm not going to change," I said, and though I tried to keep my voice normal, I could hear the sadness in it.

His face was thoughtful, no longer teasing. "It's still the other one, isn't it?"

I cringed. Funny how he seemed to know not to say the name—just like before in the car with the music. He picked up on so much about me that I never said.

"You don't have to talk about it," he told me.

I nodded, grateful.

"But don't get mad at me for hanging around, okay?" Jacob patted the back of my hand. "Because I'm not giving up. I've got loads of time."

I sighed. "You shouldn't waste it on me," I said, though I wanted him to. Especially if he was willing to accept me the way I was—damaged goods, as is.

"It's what I want to do, as long as you still like to be with me."

"I can't imagine how I could not like being with you," I told him honestly.

Jacob beamed. "I can live with that."

"Just don't expect more," I warned him, trying to pull my hand away. He held onto it obstinately.

"This doesn't really bother you, does it?" he demanded, squeezing my fingers.

"No," I sighed. Truthfully, it felt nice. His hand was so much warmer than mine; I always felt too cold these days.

"And you don't care what he thinks." Jacob jerked his thumb toward the bathroom.

"I guess not."

"So what's the problem?"

"The problem," I said, "is that it means something different to me than it does to you."

"Well." He tightened his hand around mine. "That's my problem, isn't it?"

"Fine," I grumbled. "Don't forget it, though."

"I won't. The pin's out of the grenade for me, now, eh?" He poked me in the ribs.

I rolled my eyes. I guess if he felt like making a joke out of it, he was entitled.

He chuckled quietly for a minute while his pinky finger absently traced designs against the side of my hand.

"That's a funny scar you've got there," he suddenly said, twisting my hand to examine it. "How did that happen?"

The index finger of his free hand followed the line of the long silvery crescent that was barely visible against my pale skin.

I scowled. "Do you honestly expect me to remember where all my scars come from?"

I waited for the memory to hit—to open the gaping hole. But, as it so often did, Jacob's presence kept me whole.

"It's cold," he murmured, pressing lightly against the place where James had cut me with his teeth.

And then Mike stumbled out of the bathroom, his face ashen and covered in sweat. He looked horrible.

"Oh, Mike," I gasped.

"Do you mind leaving early?" he whispered.

"No, of course not." I pulled my hand free and went to help Mike walk. He looked unsteady.

"Movie too much for you?" Jacob asked heartlessly.

Mike's glare was malevolent. "I didn't actually see any of it," he mumbled. "I was nauseated before the lights went down."

"Why didn't you say something?" I scolded as we staggered toward the exit.

"I was hoping it would pass," he said.

"Just a sec," Jacob said as we reached the door. He walked quickly back to the concession stand.

"Could I have an empty popcorn bucket?" he asked the salesgirl. She looked at Mike once, and then thrust a bucket at Jacob.

"Get him outside, please," she begged. She was obviously the one who would have to clean the floor.

I towed Mike out into the cool, wet air. He inhaled deeply. Jacob was right behind us. He helped me get Mike into the back of the car, and handed him the bucket with a serious gaze.

"Please," was all Jacob said.

We rolled down the windows, letting the icy night air blow through the car, hoping it would help Mike. I curled my arms around my legs to keep warm.

"Cold, again?" Jacob asked, putting his arm around me before I could answer.

"You're not?"

He shook his head.

“You must have a fever or something,” I grumbled. It was freezing. I touched my fingers to his forehead, and his head was hot.

“Whoa, Jake—you’re burning up!”

“I feel fine.” He shrugged. “Fit as a fiddle.”

I frowned and touched his head again. His skin blazed under my fingers.

“Your hands are like ice,” he complained.

“Maybe it’s me,” I allowed.

Mike groaned in the backseat, and threw up in the bucket. I grimaced, hoping my own stomach could stand the sound and smell. Jacob checked anxiously over his shoulder to make sure his car wasn’t defiled.

The road felt longer on the way back.

Jacob was quiet, thoughtful. He left his arm around me, and it was so warm that the cold wind felt good.

I stared out the windshield, consumed with guilt.

It was so wrong to encourage Jacob. Pure selfishness. It didn’t matter that I’d tried to make my position clear. If he felt any hope at all that this could turn into something other than friendship, then I hadn’t been clear enough.

How could I explain so that he would understand? I was an empty shell. Like a vacant house—condemned—for months I’d been utterly uninhabitable. Now I was a little improved. The front room was in better repair. But that was all—just the one small piece. He deserved better than that—better

than a one-room, falling-down fixer-upper. No amount of investment on his part could put me back in working order.

Yet I knew that I wouldn't send him away, regardless. I needed him too much, and I was selfish. Maybe I could make my side more clear, so that he would know to leave me. The thought made me shudder, and Jacob tightened his arm around me.

I drove Mike home in his Suburban, while Jacob followed behind us to take me home. Jacob was quiet all the way back to my house, and I wondered if he were thinking the same things that I was. Maybe he was changing his mind.

"I would invite myself in, since we're early," he said as we pulled up next to my truck. "But I think you might be right about the fever. I'm starting to feel a little…strange."

"Oh no, not you, too! Do you want me to drive you home?"

"No." He shook his head, his eyebrows pulling together. "I don't feel sick yet. Just…wrong. If I have to, I'll pull over."

"Will you call me as soon as you get in?" I asked anxiously.

"Sure, sure." He frowned, staring ahead into the darkness and biting his lip.

I opened my door to get out, but he grabbed my wrist lightly and held me there. I noticed again how hot his skin felt on mine.

"What is it, Jake?" I asked.

"There's something I want to tell you, Bella…but I think it's going to sound kind of corny."

I sighed. This would be more of the same from the theater. "Go ahead."

"It's just that, I know how you're unhappy a lot. And, maybe it doesn't help anything, but I wanted you to know that I'm always here. I won't ever let you down—I promise that you can always count on me. Wow, that does sound corny. But you know that, right? That I would never, ever hurt you?"

"Yeah, Jake. I know that. And I already do count on you, probably more than you know."

The smile broke across his face the way the sunrise set the clouds on fire, and I wanted to cut my tongue out. I hadn't said one word that was a lie, but I should have lied. The truth was wrong, it would hurt him. I would let him down.

A strange look crossed his face. "I really think I'd better go home now," he said.

I got out quickly.

"Call me!" I yelled as he pulled away.

I watched him go, and he seemed to be in control of the car, at least. I stared at the empty street when he was gone, feeling a little sick myself, but not for any physical reason.

How much I wished that Jacob Black had been born my brother, my flesh-and-blood brother, so that I would have some legitimate claim on him that still left me free of any blame now. Heaven knows I had never

wanted to use Jacob, but I couldn't help but interpret the guilt I felt now to mean that I had.

Even more, I had never meant to love him. One thing I truly knew—knew it in the pit of my stomach, in the center of my bones, knew it from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet, knew it deep in my empty chest—was how love gave someone the power to break you.

I'd been broken beyond repair.

But I needed Jacob now, needed him like a drug. I'd used him as a crutch for too long, and I was in deeper than I'd planned to go with anyone again. Now I couldn't bear for him to be hurt, and I couldn't keep from hurting him, either. He thought time and patience would change me, and, though I knew he was dead wrong, I also knew that I would let him try.

He was my best friend. I would always love him, and it would never, ever be enough.

I went inside to sit by the phone and bite my nails.

"Movie over already?" Charlie asked in surprise when I came in. He was on the floor, just a foot from the TV. Must be an exciting game.

"Mike got sick," I explained. "Some kind of stomach flu."

"You okay?"

"I feel fine now," I said doubtfully. Clearly, I'd been exposed.

I leaned against the kitchen counter, my hand inches from the phone, and tried to wait patiently. I thought

of the strange look on Jacob's face before he drove away, and my fingers started drumming against the counter. I should have insisted on driving him home.

I watched the clock as the minutes ticked by. Ten. Fifteen. Even when I was driving, it took only fifteen minutes, and Jacob drove faster than I did. Eighteen minutes. I picked up the phone and dialed.

It rang and rang. Maybe Billy was asleep. Maybe I'd dialed wrong. I tried again.

On the eighth ring, just as I was about to hang up, Billy answered.

"Hello?" he asked. His voice was wary, like he was expecting bad news.

"Billy, it's me, Bella—did Jake make it home yet? He left here about twenty minutes ago."

"He's here," Billy said tonelessly.

"He was supposed to call me." I was a little irritated. "He was getting sick when he left, and I was worried."

"He was…too sick to call. He's not feeling well right now." Billy sounded distant. I realized he must want to be with Jacob.

"Let me know if you need any help," I offered. "I could come down." I thought of Billy, stuck in his chair, and Jake fending for himself….

"No, no," Billy said quickly. "We're fine. Stay at your place."

The way he said it was almost rude.

"Okay," I agreed.

"Bye, Bella."

The line disconnected.

"Bye," I muttered.

Well, at least he'd made it home. Oddly, I didn't feel less worried. I trudged up the stairs, fretting. Maybe I would go down before work tomorrow to check on him.I could take soup—we had to have a can of Campbell's around here somewhere.

I realized all such plans were canceled when I woke up early—my clock said four thirty—and sprinted to the bathroom. Charlie found me there a half hour later, lying on the floor, my cheek pressed against the cold edge of the bathtub.

He looked at me for a long moment.

"Stomach flu," he finally said.

"Yes," I moaned.

"You need something?" he asked.

"Call the Newtons for me, please," I instructed hoarsely. "Tell them I have what Mike has, and that I can't make it in today. Tell them I'm sorry."

"Sure, no problem," Charlie assured me.

I spent the rest of the day on the bathroom floor, sleeping for a few hours with my head on a crumpled up towel. Charlie claimed that he had to work, but I suspected that he just wanted access to a bathroom.

He left a glass of water on the floor beside me to keep me hydrated.

It woke me up when he came back home. I could see that it was dark in my room—after nightfall. He clumped up the stairs to check on me.

“Still alive?”

“Sort of,” I said.

“Do you want anything?”

“No, thanks.”

He hesitated, clearly out of his element. “Okay, then,” he said, and then he went back down to the kitchen.

I heard the phone ring a few minutes later. Charlie spoke to someone in a low voice for a moment, and then hung up.

“Mike feels better,” he called up to me.

Well, that was encouraging. He’d only gotten sick eight hours or so before me. Eight more hours. The thought made my stomach turn, and I pulled myself up to lean over the toilet.

I fell asleep on the towel again, but when I woke up I was in my bed and it was light outside my window. I didn’t remember moving; Charlie must have carried me to my room—he’d also put the glass of water on my bedside table. I felt parched. I chugged it down, though it tasted funny from sitting stagnant all night.

I got up slowly, trying not to trigger the nausea again. I was weak, and my mouth tasted horrible, but my stomach felt fine. I looked at my clock.

My twenty-four hours were up.

I didn't push it, eating nothing but saltine crackers for breakfast. Charlie looked relieved to see me recovered.

As soon as I was sure that I wasn't going to have to spend the day on the bathroom floor again, I called Jacob.

Jacob was the one who answered, but when I heard his greeting I knew he wasn't over it.

"Hello?" His voice was broken, cracking.

"Oh, Jake," I groaned sympathetically. "You sound horrible."

"I feel horrible," he whispered.

"I'm so sorry I made you go out with me. This sucks."

"I'm glad I went." His voice was still a whisper. "Don't blame yourself. This isn't your fault."

"You'll get better soon," I promised. "I woke up this morning, and I was fine."

"You were sick?" he asked dully.

"Yes, I got it, too. But I'm fine now."

"That's good." His voice was dead.

"So you'll probably be better in a few hours," I encouraged.

I could barely hear his answer. "I don't think I have the same thing you did."

"Don't you have the stomach flu?" I asked, confused.

"No. This is something else."

"What's wrong with you?"

"Everything," he whispered. "Every part of me hurts."

The pain in his voice was nearly tangible.

"What can I do, Jake? What can I bring you?"

"Nothing. You can't come here." He was abrupt. It reminded me of Billy the other night.

"I've already been exposed to whatever you have," I pointed out.

He ignored me. "I'll call you when I can. I'll let you know when you can come down again."

"Jacob—"

"I've got to go," he said with sudden urgency.

"Call me when you feel better."

"Right," he agreed, and his voice had a strange, bitter edge.

He was silent for a moment. I was waiting for him to say goodbye, but he waited too.

"I'll see you soon," I finally said.

"Wait for me to call," he said again.

"Okay….Bye, Jacob."

“Bella,” he whispered my name, and then hung up the phone.

# Chapter 10

## THE MEADOW

Jacob didn't call.

The first time I called, Billy answered and told me that Jacob was still in bed. I got nosy, checking to make sure that Billy had taken him to a doctor. Billy said he had, but, for some reason I couldn’t nail down, I didn’t really believe him. I called again, several times a day, for the next two days, but no one was ever there.

Saturday, I decided to go see him, invitation be damned. But the little red house was empty. This frightened me—was Jacob so sick that he’d needed to go to the hospital? I stopped by the hospital on the way back home, but the nurse at the front desk told me neither Jacob or Billy had been in.

I made Charlie call Harry Clearwater as soon as he got home from work. I waited, anxious, while Charlie chatted with his old friend; the conversation seemed to go on forever without Jacob even being mentioned. It seemed that Harry had been in the hospital…some kind of tests for his heart. Charlie’s forehead got all pinched together, but Harry joked with him, blowing it off, until Charlie was laughing again. Only then did Charlie ask about Jacob, and now his side of the conversation didn’t give me much to work with, just a lot of hmms and yeahs. I drummed my fingers against the counter beside him until he put a hand over mine to stop me.

Finally, Charlie hung up the phone and turned to me.

"Harry says there's been some trouble with the phone lines, and that's why you haven't been able to get through. Billy took Jake to the doc down there, and it looks like he has mono. He's real tired, and Billy said no visitors," he reported.

"No visitors?" I demanded in disbelief.

Charlie raised one eyebrow. "Now don't you go making a pest of yourself, Bells. Billy knows what's best for Jake. He'll be up and around soon enough. Be patient."

I didn't push it. Charlie was too worried about Harry. That was clearly the more important issue—it wouldn't be right to bug him with my lesser concerns. Instead, I went straight upstairs and turned on my computer. I found a medical site online and typed "mononucleosis" into the search box.

All I knew about mono was that you were supposed to get it from kissing, which was clearly not the case with Jake. I read through the symptoms quickly—the fever he definitely had, but what about the rest of it? No horrible sore throat, no exhaustion, no headaches, at least not before he'd gone home from the movie; he'd said he felt "fit as a fiddle." Did it really come on so fast? The article made it sound like the sore stuff showed up first.

I glared at the computer screen and wondered why, exactly, I was doing this. Why did I feel so…so suspicious, like I didn't believe Billy's story? Why would Billy lie to Harry?

I was being silly, probably. I was just worried, and, to be honest, I was afraid of not being allowed to see Jacob—that made me nervous.

I skimmed through the rest of the article, looking for more information. I stopped when I got to the part about how mono could last more than a month.

A month? My mouth fell open.

But Billy couldn't enforce the no-visitors thing that long. Of course not. Jake would go crazy stuck in bed that long without anyone to talk to.

What was Billy afraid of, anyway? The article said that a person with mono needed to avoid physical activity, but there was nothing about visitors. The disease wasn't very infectious.

I'd give Billy a week, I decided, before I got pushy. A week was generous.

A week was long. By Wednesday, I was sure I wasn't going to live till Saturday.

When I'd decided to leave Billy and Jacob alone for a week, I hadn't really believed that Jacob would go along with Billy's rule. Every day when I got home from school, I ran to the phone to check for messages. There never were any.

I cheated three times by trying to call him, but the phone lines still weren't working.

I was in the house much too much, and much too alone. Without Jacob, and my adrenaline and my distractions, everything I'd been repressing started creeping up on me. The dreams got hard again. I could no longer see the end coming. Just the horrible nothingness—half the time in the forest, half the time in the empty fern sea where the white house no longer existed. Sometimes Sam Uley was there in the forest, watching me again. I paid him no attention—

there was no comfort in his presence; it made me feel no less alone. It didn't stop me from screaming myself awake, night after night.

The hole in my chest was worse than ever. I'd thought that I'd been getting it under control, but I found myself hunched over, day after day, clutching my sides together and gasping for air.

I wasn't handling alone well.

I was relieved beyond measure the morning I woke up—screaming, of course—and remembered that it was Saturday. Today I could call Jacob. And if the phone lines still weren't working, then I was going to La Push. One way or another, today would be better than the last lonely week.

I dialed, and then waited without high expectations. It caught me off guard when Billy answered on the second ring.

"Hello?"

"Oh, hey, the phone is working again! Hi, Billy. It's Bella. I was just calling to see how Jacob is doing. Is he up for visitors yet? I was thinking about dropping by—"

"I'm sorry, Bella," Billy interrupted, and I wondered if he were watching TV; he sounded distracted. "He's not in."

"Oh." It took me a second. "So he's feeling better then?"

"Yeah," Billy hesitated for an instant too long. "Turns out it wasn't mono after all. Just some other virus."

"Oh. So…where is he?"

"He's giving some friends a ride up to Port Angeles—I think they were going to catch a double feature or something. He's gone for the whole day."

"Well, that's a relief. I've been so worried. I'm glad he felt good enough to get out." My voice sounded horribly phony as I babbled on.

Jacob was better, but not well enough to call me. He was out with friends. I was sitting home, missing him more every hour. I was lonely, worried, bored…perforated—and now also desolate as I realized that the week apart had not had the same effect on him.

"Is there anything in particular you wanted?" Billy asked politely.

"No, not really."

"Well, I'll tell him that you called," Billy promised. "Bye, Bella."

"Bye," I replied, but he'd already hung up.

I stood for a moment with the phone still in my hand.

Jacob must have changed his mind, just like I'd feared. He was going to take my advice and not waste any more time on someone who couldn't return his feelings. I felt the blood run out of my face.

"Something wrong?" Charlie asked as he came down the stairs.

"No," I lied, hanging up the phone. "Billy says Jacob is feeling better. It wasn't mono. So that's good."

"Is he coming here, or are you going there?" Charlie asked absentmindedly as he started poking through the fridge.

"Neither," I admitted. "He's going out with some other friends."

The tone of my voice finally caught Charlie's attention. He looked up at me with sudden alarm, his hands frozen around a package of cheese slices.

"Isn't it a little early for lunch?" I asked as lightly as I could manage, trying to distract him.

"No, I'm just packing something to take out to the river...."

"Oh, fishing today?"

"Well, Harry called...and it's not raining." He was creating a stack of food on the counter as he spoke. Suddenly he looked up again as if he'd just realized something. "Say, did you want me to stay with you, since Jake's out?"

"That's okay, Dad," I said, working to sound indifferent. "The fish bite better when the weather's nice."

He stared at me, indecision clear on his face. I knew that he was worrying, afraid to leave me alone, in case I got "mopey" again.

"Seriously, Dad. I think I'll call Jessica," I fibbed quickly. I'd rather be alone than have him watching me all day. "We have a Calculus test to study for. I could use her help." That part was true. But I'd have to make do without it.

"That's a good idea. You've been spending so much time with Jacob, your other friends are going to think you've forgotten them."

I smiled and nodded as if I cared what my other friends thought.

Charlie started to turn, but then spun back with a worried expression. "Hey, you'll study here or at Jess's, right?"

"Sure, where else?"

"Well, it's just that I want you to be careful to stay out of the woods, like I told you before."

It took me a minute to understand, distracted as I was. "More bear trouble?"

Charlie nodded, frowning. "We've got a missing hiker—the rangers found his camp early this morning, but no sign of him. There were some really big animal prints…of course those could have come later, smelling the food….Anyway, they're setting traps for it now."

"Oh," I said vaguely. I wasn't really listening to his warnings; I was much more upset by the situation with Jacob than by the possibility of being eaten by a bear.

I was glad that Charlie was in a hurry. He didn't wait for me to call Jessica, so I didn't have to put on that charade. I went through the motions of gathering my schoolbooks on the kitchen table to pack them in my bag; that was probably too much, and if he hadn't been eager to hit the holes, it might have made him suspicious.

I was so busy looking busy that the ferociously empty day ahead didn't really crash down on me until after I'd watched him drive away. It only took about two minutes of staring at the silent kitchen phone to decide that I wasn't staying home today. I considered my options.

I wasn't going to call Jessica. As far as I could tell, Jessica had crossed over to the dark side.

I could drive to La Push and get my motorcycle—an appealing thought but for one minor problem: who was going to drive me to the emergency room if I needed it afterward?

Or…I already had our map and compass in the truck. I was pretty sure I understood the process well enough by now that I wouldn't get lost. Maybe I could eliminate two lines today, putting us ahead of schedule for whenever Jacob decided to honor me with his presence again. I refused to think about how long that might be. Or if it was going to be never.

I felt a brief twinge of guilt as I realized how Charlie would feel about this, but I ignored it. I just couldn't stay in the house again today.

A few minutes later I was on the familiar dirt road that led to nowhere in particular. I had the windows rolled down and I drove as fast as was healthy for my truck, trying to enjoy the wind against my face. It was cloudy, but almost dry—a very nice day, for Forks.

Getting started took me longer than it would have taken Jacob. After I parked in the usual spot, I had to spend a good fifteen minutes studying the little needle on the compass face and the markings on the now worn map. When I was reasonably certain that I was

following the right line of the web, I set off into the woods.

The forest was full of life today, all the little creatures enjoying the momentary dryness. Somehow, though, even with the birds chirping and cawing, the insects buzzing noisily around my head, and the occasional scurry of the field mice through the shrubs, the forest seemed creepier today; it reminded me of my most recent nightmare. I knew it was just because I was alone, missing Jacob's carefree whistle and the sound of another pair of feet squishing across the damp ground.

The sense of unease grew stronger the deeper I got into the trees. Breathing started to get more difficult—not because of exertion, but because I was having trouble with the stupid hole in my chest again. I kept my arms tight around my torso and tried to banish the ache from my thoughts. I almost turned around, but I hated to waste the effort I'd already expended.

The rhythm of my footsteps started to numb my mind and my pain as I trudged on. My breathing evened out eventually, and I was glad I hadn't quit. I was getting better at this bushwhacking thing; I could tell I was faster.

I didn't realize quite how much more efficiently I was moving. I thought I'd covered maybe four miles, and I wasn't even starting to look around for it yet. And then, with an abruptness that disoriented me, I stepped through a low arch made by two vine maples—pushing past the chest-high ferns—into the meadow.

It was the same place, of that I was instantly sure. I'd never seen another clearing so symmetrical. It was as perfectly round as if someone had intentionally

created the flawless circle, tearing out the trees but leaving no evidence of that violence in the waving grass. To the east, I could hear the stream bubbling quietly.

The place wasn't nearly so stunning without the sunlight, but it was still very beautiful and serene. It was the wrong season for wildflowers; the ground was thick with tall grass that swayed in the light breeze like ripples across a lake.

It was the same place…but it didn't hold what I had been searching for.

The disappointment was nearly as instantaneous as the recognition. I sank down right where I was, kneeling there at the edge of the clearing, beginning to gasp.

What was the point of going any farther? Nothing lingered here. Nothing more than the memories that I could have called back whenever I wanted to, if I was ever willing to endure the corresponding pain—the pain that had me now, had me cold. There was nothing special about this place without him. I wasn't exactly sure what I'd hoped to feel here, but the meadow was empty of atmosphere, empty of everything, just like everywhere else. Just like my nightmares. My head swirled dizzily.

At least I'd come alone. I felt a rush of thankfulness as I realized that. If I'd discovered the meadow with Jacob…well, there was no way I could have disguised the abyss I was plunging into now. How could I have explained the way I was fracturing into pieces, the way I had to curl into a ball to keep the empty hole from tearing me apart? It was so much better that I didn't have an audience.

And I wouldn't have to explain to anyone why I was in such a hurry to leave, either. Jacob would have assumed, after going to so much trouble to locate the stupid place, I would want to spend more than a few seconds here. But I was already trying to find the strength to get to my feet again, forcing myself out of the ball so that I could escape. There was too much pain in this empty place to bear—I would crawl away if I had to.

How lucky that I was alone!

Alone. I repeated the word with grim satisfaction as I wrenched myself to my feet despite the pain. At precisely that moment, a figure stepped out from the trees to the north, some thirty paces away.

A dizzying array of emotions shot through me in a second. The first was surprise; I was far from any trail here, and I didn't expect company. Then, as my eyes focused on the motionless figure, seeing the utter stillness, the pallid skin, a rush of piercing hope rocked through me. I suppressed it viciously, fighting against the equally sharp lash of agony as my eyes continued to the face beneath the black hair, the face that wasn't the one I wanted to see. Next was fear; this was not the face I grieved for, but it was close enough for me to know that the man facing me was no stray hiker.

And finally, in the end, recognition.

"Laurent!" I cried in surprised pleasure.

It was an irrational response. I probably should have stopped at fear.

Laurent had been one of James's coven when we'd first met. He hadn't been involved with the hunt that

followed—the hunt where I was the quarry—but that was only because he was afraid; I was protected by a bigger coven than his own. It would have been different if that wasn't the case—he'd had no compunctions, at the time, against making a meal of me. Of course, he must have changed, because he'd gone to Alaska to live with the other civilized coven there, the other family that refused to drink human blood for ethical reasons. The other family like…but I couldn't let myself think the name.

Yes, fear would have made more sense, but all I felt was an overwhelming satisfaction. The meadow was a magic place again. A darker magic than I'd expected, to be sure, but magic all the same. Here was the connection I'd sought. The proof, however remote, that—somewhere in the same world where I lived—he did exist.

It was impossible how exactly the same Laurent looked. I suppose it was very silly and human to expect some kind of change in the last year. But there was something…I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

"Bella?" he asked, looking more astonished than I felt.

"You remember." I smiled. It was ridiculous that I should be so elated because a vampire knew my name.

He grinned. "I didn't expect to see you here." He strolled toward me, his expression bemused.

"Isn't it the other way around? I do live here. I thought you'd gone to Alaska."

He stopped about ten paces away, cocking his head to the side. His face was the most beautiful face I'd seen in what felt like an eternity. I studied his features

with a strangely greedy sense of release. Here was someone I didn't have to pretend for—someone who already knew everything I could never say.

"You're right," he agreed. "I did go to Alaska. Still, I didn't expect…When I found the Cullen place empty, I thought they'd moved on."

"Oh." I bit my lip as the name set the raw edges of my wound throbbing. It took me a second to compose myself. Laurent waited with curious eyes.

"They did move on," I finally managed to tell him.

"Hmm," he murmured. "I'm surprised they left you behind. Weren't you sort of a pet of theirs?" His eyes were innocent of any intended offense.

I smiled wryly. "Something like that."

"Hmm," he said, thoughtful again.

At that precise moment, I realized why he looked the same—too much the same. After Carlisle told us that Laurent had stayed with Tanya's family, I'd begun to picture him, on the rare occasions that I thought of him at all, with the same golden eyes that the…Cullens—I forced the name out, wincing—had. That all good vampires had.

I took an involuntary step back, and his curious, dark red eyes followed the movement.

"Do they visit often?" he asked, still casual, but his weight shifted toward me.

"Lie," the beautiful velvet voice whispered anxiously from my memory.

I started at the sound of his voice, but it should not have surprised me. Was I not in the worst danger imaginable? The motorcycle was safe as kittens next to this.

I did what the voice said to do.

“Now and again.” I tried to make my voice light, relaxed. “The time seems longer to me, I imagine. You know how they get distracted….” I was beginning to babble. I had to work to shut myself up.

“Hmm,” he said again. “The house smelled like it had been vacant for a while….”

“You must lie better than that, Bella,” the voice urged.

I tried. “I’ll have to mention to Carlisle that you stopped by. He’ll be sorry they missed your visit.” I pretended to deliberate for a second. “But I probably shouldn’t mention it to…Edward, I suppose—” I barely managed to say his name, and it twisted my expression on the way out, ruining my bluff “—he has such a temper…well, I’m sure you remember. He’s still touchy about the whole James thing.” I rolled my eyes and waved one hand dismissively, like it was all ancient history, but there was an edge of hysteria to my voice. I wondered if he would recognize what it was.

“Is he really?” Laurent asked pleasantly…skeptically.

I kept my reply short, so that my voice wouldn’t betray my panic. “Mm-hmm.”

Laurent took a casual step to the side, gazing around at the little meadow. I didn’t miss that the step brought him closer to me. In my head, the voice responded with a low snarl.

"So how are things working out in Denali? Carlisle said you were staying with Tanya?" My voice was too high.

The question made him pause. "I like Tanya very much," he mused. "And her sister Irina even more.…I've never stayed in one place for so long before, and I enjoy the advantages, the novelty of it. But, the restrictions are difficult.…I'm surprised that any of them can keep it up for long." He smiled at me conspiratorially. "Sometimes I cheat."

I couldn't swallow. My foot started to ease back, but I froze when his red eyes flickered down to catch the movement.

"Oh," I said in a faint voice. "Jasper has problems with that, too."

"Don't move," the voice whispered. I tried to do what he instructed. It was hard; the instinct to take flight was nearly uncontrollable.

"Really?" Laurent seemed interested. "Is that why they left?"

"No," I answered honestly. "Jasper is more careful at home."

"Yes," Laurent agreed. "I am, too."

The step forward he took now was quite deliberate.

"Did Victoria ever find you?" I asked, breathless, desperate to distract him. It was the first question that popped into my head, and I regretted it as soon as the words were spoken. Victoria—who had hunted me with James, and then disappeared—was not

someone I wanted to think of at this particular moment.

But the question did stop him.

"Yes," he said, hesitating on that step. "I actually came here as a favor to her." He made a face. "She won't be happy about this."

"About what?" I said eagerly, inviting him to continue. He was glaring into the trees, away from me. I took advantage of his diversion, taking a furtive step back.

He looked back at me and smiled—the expression made him look like a black-haired angel.

"About me killing you," he answered in a seductive purr.

I staggered back another step. The frantic growling in my head made it hard to hear.

"She wanted to save that part for herself," he went on blithely. "She's sort of…put out with you, Bella."

"Me?" I squeaked.

He shook his head and chuckled. "I know, it seems a little backward to me, too. But James was her mate, and your Edward killed him."

Even here, on the point of death, his name tore against my unhealed wounds like a serrated edge.

Laurent was oblivious to my reaction. "She thought it more appropriate to kill you than Edward—fair turnabout, mate for mate. She asked me to get the lay of the land for her, so to speak. I didn't imagine you would be so easy to get to. So maybe her plan was

flawed—apparently it wouldn't be the revenge she imagined, since you must not mean very much to him if he left you here unprotected."

Another blow, another tear through my chest.

Laurent's weight shifted slightly, and I stumbled another step back.

He frowned. "I suppose she'll be angry, all the same."

"Then why not wait for her?" I choked out.

A mischievous grin rearranged his features. "Well, you've caught me at a bad time, Bella. I didn't come to this place on Victoria's mission—I was hunting. I'm quite thirsty, and you do smell…simply mouthwatering."

Laurent looked at me with approval, as if he meant it as a compliment.

"Threaten him," the beautiful delusion ordered, his voice distorted with dread.

"He'll know it was you," I whispered obediently. "You won't get away with this."

"And why not?" Laurent's smile widened. He gazed around the small opening in the trees. "The scent will wash away with the next rain. No one will find your body—you'll simply go missing, like so many, many other humans. There's no reason for Edward to think of me, if he cares enough to investigate. This is nothing personal, let me assure you, Bella. Just thirst."

"Beg," my hallucination begged.

“Please,” I gasped.

Laurent shook his head, his face kind. “Look at it this way, Bella. You’re very lucky I was the one to find you.”

“Am I?” I mouthed, faltering another step back.

Laurent followed, lithe and graceful.

“Yes,” he assured me. “I’ll be very quick. You won’t feel a thing, I promise. Oh, I’ll lie to Victoria about that later, naturally, just to placate her. But if you knew what she had planned for you, Bella . . .” He shook his head with a slow movement, almost as if in disgust. “I swear you’d be thanking me for this.”

I stared at him in horror.

He sniffed at the breeze that blew threads of my hair in his direction. “Mouthwatering,” he repeated, inhaling deeply.

I tensed for the spring, my eyes squinting as I cringed away, and the sound of Edward’s furious roar echoed distantly in the back of my head. His name burst through all the walls I’d built to contain it. Edward, Edward, Edward. I was going to die. It shouldn’t matter if I thought of him now. Edward, I love you.

Through my narrowed eyes, I watched as Laurent paused in the act of inhaling and whipped his head abruptly to the left. I was afraid to look away from him, to follow his glance, though he hardly needed a distraction or any other trick to overpower me. I was too amazed to feel relief when he started slowly backing away from me.

"I don't believe it," he said, his voice so low that I barely heard it.

I had to look then. My eyes scanned the meadow, searching for the interruption that had extended my life by a few seconds. At first I saw nothing, and my gaze flickered back to Laurent. He was retreating more quickly now, his eyes boring into the forest.

Then I saw it; a huge black shape eased out of the trees, quiet as a shadow, and stalked deliberately toward the vampire. It was enormous—as tall as a horse, but thicker, much more muscular. The long muzzle grimaced, revealing a line of dagger-like incisors. A grisly snarl rolled out from between the teeth, rumbling across the clearing like a prolonged crack of thunder.

The bear. Only, it wasn't a bear at all. Still, this gigantic black monster had to be the creature causing all the alarm. From a distance, anyone would assume it was a bear. What else could be so vast, so powerfully built?

I wished I were lucky enough to see it from a distance. Instead, it padded silently through the grass a mere ten feet from where I stood.

"Don't move an inch," Edward's voice whispered.

I stared at the monstrous creature, my mind boggling as I tried to put a name to it. There was a distinctly canine cast to the shape of it, the way it moved. I could only think of one possibility, locked in horror as I was. Yet I'd never imagined that a wolf could get so big.

Another growl rumbled in its throat, and I shuddered away from the sound.

Laurent was backing toward the edge of the trees, and, under the freezing terror, confusion swept through me. Why was Laurent retreating? Granted, the wolf was monstrous in size, but it was just an animal. What reason would a vampire have for fearing an animal? And Laurent was afraid. His eyes were wide with horror, just like mine.

As if in answer to my question, suddenly the mammoth wolf was not alone. Flanking it on either side, another two gigantic beasts prowled silently into the meadow. One was a deep gray, the other brown, neither one quite as tall as the first. The gray wolf came through the trees only a few feet from me, its eyes locked on Laurent.

Before I could even react, two more wolves followed, lined up in a V, like geese flying south. Which meant that the rusty brown monster that shrugged through the brush last was close enough for me to touch.

I gave an involuntary gasp and jumped back—which was the stupidest thing I could have done. I froze again, waiting for the wolves to turn on me, the much weaker of the available prey. I wished briefly that Laurent would get on with it and crush the wolf pack—it should be so simple for him. I guessed that, between the two choices before me, being eaten by wolves was almost certainly the worse option.

The wolf closest to me, the reddish brown one, turned its head slightly at the sound of my gasp.

The wolf's eyes were dark, nearly black. It gazed at me for a fraction of a second, the deep eyes seeming too intelligent for a wild animal.

As it stared at me, I suddenly thought of Jacob—again, with gratitude. At least I'd come here alone, to

this fairytale meadow filled with dark monsters. At least Jacob wasn't going to die, too. At least I wouldn't have his death on my hands.

Then another low growl from the leader caused the russet wolf to whip his head around, back toward Laurent.

Laurent was staring at the pack of monster wolves with unconcealed shock and fear. The first I could understand. But I was stunned when, without warning, he spun and disappeared into the trees.

He ran away.

The wolves were after him in a second, sprinting across the open grass with a few powerful bounds, snarling and snapping so loudly that my hands flew up instinctively to cover my ears. The sound faded with surprising swiftness once they disappeared into the woods.

And then I was alone again.

My knees buckled under me, and I fell onto my hands, sobs building in my throat.

I knew I needed to leave, and leave now. How long would the wolves chase Laurent before they doubled back for me? Or would Laurent turn on them? Would he be the one that came looking?

I couldn't move at first, though; my arms and legs were shaking, and I didn't know how to get back to my feet.

My mind couldn't move past the fear, the horror or the confusion. I didn't understand what I'd just witnessed.

A vampire should not have run from overgrown dogs like that. What good would their teeth be against his granite skin?

And the wolves should have given Laurent a wide berth. Even if their extraordinary size had taught them to fear nothing, it still made no sense that they would pursue him. I doubted his icy marble skin would smell anything like food. Why would they pass up something warm-blooded and weak like me to chase after Laurent?

I couldn't make it add up.

A cold breeze whipped through the meadow, swaying the grass like something was moving through it.

I scrambled to my feet, backing away even though the wind brushed harmlessly past me. Stumbling in panic, I turned and ran headlong into the trees.

The next few hours were agony. It took me three times as long to escape the trees as it had to get to the meadow. At first I paid no attention to where I was headed, focused only on what I was running from. By the time I collected myself enough to remember the compass, I was deep in the unfamiliar and menacing forest. My hands were shaking so violently that I had to set the compass on the muddy ground to be able to read it. Every few minutes I would stop to put the compass down and check that I was still heading northwest, hearing—when the sounds weren't hidden behind the frantic squelching of my footsteps—the quiet whisper of unseen things moving in the leaves.

The call of a jaybird made me leap back and fall into a thick stand of young spruce, scraping up my arms and tangling my hair with sap. The sudden rush of a

squirrel up a hemlock made me scream so loud it hurt my own ears.

At last there was a break in the trees ahead. I came out onto the empty road a mile or so south of where I'd left the truck. Exhausted as I was, I jogged up the lane until I found it. By the time I pulled myself into the cab, I was sobbing again. I fiercely shoved down both stiff locks before I dug my keys out of my pocket. The roar of the engine was comforting and sane. It helped me control the tears as I sped as fast as my truck would allow toward the main highway.

I was calmer, but still a mess when I got home. Charlie's cruiser was in the driveway—I hadn't realized how late it was. The sky was already dusky.

"Bella?" Charlie asked when I slammed the front door behind me and hastily turned the locks.

"Yeah, it's me." My voice was unsteady.

"Where have you been?" he thundered, appearing through the kitchen doorway with an ominous expression.

I hesitated. He'd probably called the Stanleys. I'd better stick to the truth.

"I was hiking," I admitted.

His eyes were tight. "What happened to going to Jessica's?"

"I didn't feel like Calculus today."

Charlie folded his arms across his chest. "I thought I asked you to stay out of the forest."

“Yeah, I know. Don’t worry, I won’t do it again.” I shuddered.

Charlie seemed to really look at me for the first time. I remembered that I had spent some time on the forest floor today; I must be a mess.

“What happened?” Charlie demanded.

Again, I decided that the truth, or part of it anyway, was the best option. I was too shaken to pretend that I’d spent an uneventful day with the flora and fauna.

“I saw the bear.” I tried to say it calmly, but my voice was high and shaky. “It’s not a bear, though—it’s some kind of wolf. And there are five of them. A big black one, and gray, and reddish-brown . . .”

Charlie’s eyes grew round with horror. He strode quickly to me and grabbed the tops of my arms.

“Are you okay?”

My head bobbed in a weak nod.

“Tell me what happened.”

“They didn’t pay any attention to me. But after they were gone, I ran away and I fell down a lot.”

He let go of my shoulders and wrapped his arms around me. For a long moment, he didn’t say anything.

“Wolves,” he murmured.

“What?”

"The rangers said the tracks were wrong for a bear—but wolves just don't get that big...."

"These were huge."

"How many did you say you saw?"

"Five."

Charlie shook his head, frowning with anxiety. He finally spoke in a tone that allowed no argument. "No more hiking."

"No problem," I promised fervently.

Charlie called the station to report what I'd seen. I fudged a little bit about where exactly I'd seen the wolves—claiming I'd been on the trail that led to the north. I didn't want my dad to know how deep I'd gone into the forest against his wishes, and, more importantly, I didn't want anyone wandering near where Laurent might be searching for me. The thought of it made me feel sick.

"Are you hungry?" he asked me when he hung up the phone.

I shook my head, though I must have been starving. I hadn't eaten all day.

"Just tired," I told him. I turned for the stairs.

"Hey," Charlie said, his voice suddenly suspicious again. "Didn't you say Jacob was gone for the day?"

"That's what Billy said," I told him, confused by his question.

He studied my expression for a minute, and seemed satisfied with what he saw there.

“Huh.”

“Why?” I demanded. It sounded like he was implying that I’d been lying to him this morning. About something besides studying with Jessica.

“Well, it’s just that when I went to pick up Harry, I saw Jacob out in front of the store down there with some of his friends. I waved hi, but he…well, I guess I don’t know if he saw me. I think maybe he was arguing with his friends. He looked strange, like he was upset about something. And…different. It’s like you can watch that kid growing! He gets bigger every time I see him.”

“Billy said Jake and his friends were going up to Port Angeles to see some movies. They were probably just waiting for someone to meet them.”

“Oh.” Charlie nodded and headed for the kitchen.

I stood in the hall, thinking about Jacob arguing with his friends. I wondered if he had confronted Embry about the situation with Sam. Maybe that was the reason he’d ditched me today—if it meant he could sort things out with Embry, I was glad he had.

I paused to check the locks again before I went to my room. It was a silly thing to do. What difference would a lock make to any of the monsters I’d seen this afternoon? I assumed the handle alone would stymie the wolves, not having opposable thumbs. And if Laurent came here…

Or…Victoria.

I lay down on my bed, but I was shaking too hard to hope for sleep. I curled into a cramped ball under my quilt, and faced the horrifying facts.

There was nothing I could do. There were no precautions I could take. There was no place I could hide. There was no one who could help me.

I realized, with a nauseous roll of my stomach, that the situation was worse than even that. Because all those facts applied to Charlie, too. My father, sleeping one room away from me, was just a hairsbreadth off the heart of the target that was centered on me. My scent would lead them here, whether I was here or not.

The tremors rocked me until my teeth chattered.

To calm myself, I fantasized the impossible: I imagined the big wolves catching up to Laurent in the woods and massacring the indestructible immortal the way they would any normal person. Despite the absurdity of such a vision, the idea comforted me. If the wolves got him, then he couldn't tell Victoria I was here all alone. If he didn't return, maybe she'd think the Cullens were still protecting me. If only the wolves could win such a fight....

My good vampires were never coming back; how soothing it was to imagine that the other kind could also disappear.

I squeezed my eyes tight together and waited for unconsciousness—almost eager for my nightmare to start. Better that than the pale, beautiful face that smiled at me now from behind my lids.

In my imagination, Victoria's eyes were black with thirst, bright with anticipation, and her lips curled

back from her gleaming teeth in pleasure. Her red hair was brilliant as fire; it blew chaotically around her wild face.

Laurent's words repeated in my head. If you knew what she had planned for you....

I pressed my fist against my mouth to keep from screaming.

# Chapter 11

## CULT

Each time that I opened my eyes to the morning light and realized I'd lived through another night was a surprise to me. After the surprise wore off, my heart would start to race and my palms would sweat; I couldn't really breathe again until I'd gotten up and ascertained that Charlie had survived as well.

I could tell he was worried—watching me jump at any loud sound, or my face suddenly go white for no reason that he could see. From the questions he asked now and then, he seemed to blame the change on Jacob's continued absence.

The terror that was always foremost in my thoughts usually distracted me from the fact that another week had passed, and Jacob still hadn't called me. But when I was able to concentrate on my normal life—if my life was really ever normal—this upset me.

I missed him horribly.

It had been bad enough to be alone before I was scared silly. Now, more than ever, I yearned for his carefree laugh and his infectious grin. I needed the safe sanity of his homemade garage and his warm hand around my cold fingers.

I'd half expected him to call on Monday. If there had been some progress with Embry, wouldn't he want to report it? I wanted to believe that it was worry for his friend that was occupying all his time, not that he was just giving up on me.

I called him Tuesday, but no one answered. Were the phone lines still having problems? Or had Billy invested in caller I.D.?

On Wednesday I called every half hour until after eleven at night, desperate to hear the warmth of Jacob's voice.

Thursday I sat in my truck in front of my house—with the locks pushed down—keys in hand, for a solid hour. I was arguing with myself, trying to justify a quick trip to La Push, but I couldn't do it.

I knew that Laurent had gone back to Victoria by now. If I went to La Push, I took the chance of leading one of them there. What if they caught up to me when Jake was nearby? As much as it hurt me, I knew it was better for Jacob that he was avoiding me. Safer for him.

It was bad enough that I couldn't figure out a way to keep Charlie safe. Nighttime was the most likely time that they would come looking for me, and what could I say to get Charlie out of the house? If I told him the truth, he'd have me locked up in a rubber room somewhere. I would have endured that—welcomed it, even—if it could have kept him safe. But Victoria would still come to his house first, looking for me. Maybe, if she found me here, that would be enough for her. Maybe she would just leave when she was done with me.

So I couldn't run away. Even if I could, where would I go? To Reneé? I shuddered at the thought of dragging my lethal shadows into my mother's safe, sunny world. I would never endanger her that way.

The worry was eating a hole in my stomach. Soon I would have matching punctures.

That night, Charlie did me another favor and called Harry again to see if the Blacks were out of town. Harry reported that Billy had attended the council meeting Wednesday night, and never mentioned anything about leaving. Charlie warned me not to make a nuisance of myself—Jacob would call when he got around to it.

Friday afternoon, as I drove home from school, it hit me out of the blue.

I wasn't paying attention to the familiar road, letting the sound of the engine deaden my brain and silence the worries, when my subconscious delivered a verdict it must have been working on for some time without my knowledge.

As soon as I thought of it, I felt really stupid for not seeing it sooner. Sure, I'd had a lot on my mind—revenge-obsessed vampires, giant mutant wolves, a ragged hole in the center of my chest—but when I laid the evidence out, it was embarrassingly obvious.

Jacob avoiding me. Charlie saying he looked strange, upset....Billy's vague, unhelpful answers.

Holy crow, I knew exactly what was going on with Jacob.

It was Sam Uley. Even my nightmares had been trying to tell me that. Sam had gotten to Jacob. Whatever was happening to the other boys on the reservation had reached out and stolen my friend. He'd been sucked into Sam's cult.

He hadn't given up on me at all, I realized with a rush of feeling.

I let my truck idle in front of my house. What should I do? I weighed the dangers against each other.

If I went looking for Jacob, I risked the chance of Victoria or Laurent finding me with him.

If I didn't go after him, Sam would pull him deeper into his frightening, compulsory gang. Maybe it would be too late if I didn't act soon.

It had been a week, and no vampires had come for me yet. A week was more than enough time for them to have returned, so I must not be a priority. Most likely, as I'd decided before, they would come for me at night. The chances of them following me to La Push were much lower than the chance of losing Jacob to Sam.

It was worth the danger of the secluded forest road. This was no idle visit to see what was going on. I knew what was going on. This was a rescue mission. I was going to talk to Jacob—kidnap him if I had to. I'd once seen a PBS show on deprogramming the brainwashed. There had to be some kind of cure.

I decided I'd better call Charlie first. Maybe whatever was going on down in La Push was something the police should be involved in. I dashed inside, in a hurry to be on my way.

Charlie answered the phone at the station himself.

"Chief Swan."

"Dad, it's Bella."

"What's wrong?"

I couldn't argue with his doomsday assumption this time. My voice was shaking.

"I'm worried about Jacob."

"Why?" he asked, surprised by the unexpected topic.

"I think…I think something weird is going on down at the reservation. Jacob told me about some strange stuff happening with the other boys his age. Now he's acting the same way and I'm scared."

"What kind of stuff?" He used his professional, police business voice. That was good; he was taking me seriously.

"First he was scared, and then he was avoiding me, and now…I'm afraid he's part of that bizarre gang down there, Sam's gang. Sam Uley's gang."

"Sam Uley?" Charlie repeated, surprised again.

"Yes."

Charlie's voice was more relaxed when he answered. "I think you've got it wrong, Bells. Sam Uley is a great kid. Well, he's a man now. A good son. You should hear Billy talk about him. He's really doing wonders with the youth on the reservation. He's the one who—" Charlie broke off mid-sentence, and I guessed that he had been about to make a reference to the night I'd gotten lost in the woods. I moved on quickly.

"Dad, it's not like that. Jacob was scared of him."

"Did you talk to Billy about this?" He was trying to soothe me now. I'd lost him as soon as I'd mentioned Sam.

“Billy’s not concerned.”

“Well, Bella, then I’m sure it’s okay. Jacob’s a kid; he was probably just messing around. I’m sure he’s fine. He can’t spend every waking minute with you, after all.”

“This isn’t about me,” I insisted, but the battle was lost.

“I don’t think you need to worry about this. Let Billy take care of Jacob.”

“Charlie . . .” My voice was starting to sound whiney.

“Bells, I got a lot on my plate right now. Two tourists have gone missing off a trail outside crescent lake.” There was an anxious edge to his voice. “This wolf problem is getting out of hand.”

I was momentarily distracted—stunned, really—by his news. There was no way the wolves could have survived a match-up with Laurent….

“Are you sure that’s what happened to them?” I asked.

“Afraid so, honey. There was—” He hesitated. “There were tracks again, and…some blood this time.”

“Oh!” It must not have come to a confrontation, then. Laurent must have simply outrun the wolves, but why? What I’d seen in the meadow just got stranger and stranger—more impossible to understand.

“Look, I really have to go. Don’t worry about Jake, Bella. I’m sure it’s nothing.”

"Fine," I said curtly, frustrated as his words reminded me of the more urgent crisis at hand. "Bye." I hung up.

I stared at the phone for a long minute. What the hell, I decided.

Billy answered after two rings.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Billy," I almost growled. I tried to sound more friendly as I continued. "Can I talk to Jacob, please?"

"Jake's not here."

What a shock. "Do you know where he is?"

"He's out with his friends." Billy's voice was careful.

"Oh yeah? Anyone I know? Quil?" I could tell the words didn't come across as casually as I'd meant them to.

"No," Billy said slowly. "I don't think he's with Quil today."

I knew better than to mention Sam's name.

"Embry?" I asked.

Billy seemed happier to answer this one. "Yeah, he's with Embry."

That was enough for me. Embry was one of them.

"Well, have him call me when he gets in, all right?"

"Sure, sure. No problem." Click.

“See you soon, Billy,” I muttered into the dead phone.

I drove to La Push determined to wait. I’d sit out front of his house all night if I had to. I’d miss school. The boy was going to have to come home sometime, and when he did, he was going to have to talk to me.

My mind was so preoccupied that the trip I’d been terrified of making seemed to take only a few seconds. Before I was expecting it, the forest began to thin, and I knew I would soon be able to see the first little houses of the reservation.

Walking away, along the left side of the road, was a tall boy with a baseball cap.

My breath caught for just a moment in my throat, hopeful that luck was with me for once, and I’d stumbled across Jacob without hardly trying. But this boy was too wide, and the hair was short under the hat. Even from behind, I was sure it was Quil, though he looked bigger than the last time I’d seen him. What was with these Quileute boys? Were they feeding them experimental growth hormones?

I crossed over to the wrong side of the road to stop next to him. He looked up when the roar of my truck approached.

Quil’s expression frightened me more than it surprised me. His face was bleak, brooding, his forehead creased with worry.

“Oh, hey, Bella,” he greeted me dully.

“Hi, Quil….Are you okay?”

He stared at me morosely. “Fine.”

"Can I give you a ride somewhere?" I offered.

"Sure, I guess," he mumbled. He shuffled around the front of the truck and opened the passenger door to climb in.

"Where to?"

"My house is on the north side, back behind the store," he told me.

"Have you seen Jacob today?" The question burst from me almost before he'd finished speaking.

I looked at Quil eagerly, waiting for his answer. He stared out the windshield for a second before he spoke. "From a distance," he finally said.

"A distance?" I echoed.

"I tried to follow them—he was with Embry." His voice was low, hard to hear over the engine. I leaned closer. "I know they saw me. But they turned and just disappeared into the trees. I don't think they were alone—I think Sam and his crew might have been with them.

"I've been stumbling around in the forest for an hour, yelling for them. I just barely found the road again when you drove up."

"So Sam did get to him." The words were a little distorted—my teeth were gritted together.

Quil stared at me. "You know about that?"

I nodded. "Jake told me…before."

"Before," Quil repeated, and sighed.

"Jacob's just as bad as the others now?"

"Never leaves Sam's side." Quil turned his head and spit out the open window.

"And before that—did he avoid everyone? Was he acting upset?"

His voice was low and rough. "Not for as long as the others. Maybe one day. Then Sam caught up with him."

"What do you think it is? Drugs or something?"

"I can't see Jacob or Embry getting into anything like that…but what do I know? What else could it be? And why aren't the old people worried?" He shook his head, and the fear showed in his eyes now. "Jacob didn't want to be a part of this…cult. I don't understand what could change him." He stared at me, his face frightened. "I don't want to be next."

My eyes mirrored his fear. That was the second time I'd heard it described as a cult. I shivered. "Are your parents any help?"

He grimaced. "Right. My grandfather's on the council with Jacob's dad. Sam Uley is the best thing that ever happened to this place, as far as he's concerned."

We stared at each other for a prolonged moment. We were in La Push now, and my truck was barely crawling along the empty road. I could see the village's only store not too far ahead.

"I'll get out now," Quil said. "My house is right over there." He gestured toward the small wooden rectangle behind the store. I pulled over to the shoulder, and he jumped out.

"I'm going to go wait for Jacob," I told him in a hard voice.

"Good luck." He slammed the door and shuffled forward along the road, his head bent forward, his shoulders slumped.

Quil's face haunted me as I made a wide U-turn and headed back toward the Blacks'. He was terrified of being next. What was happening here?

I stopped in front of Jacob's house, killing the motor and rolling down the windows. It was stuffy today, no breeze. I put my feet up on the dashboard and settled in to wait.

A movement flashed in my peripheral vision—I turned and spotted Billy looking at me through the front window with a confused expression. I waved once and smiled a tight smile, but stayed where I was.

His eyes narrowed; he let the curtain fall across the glass.

I was prepared to stay as long as it took, but I wished I had something to do. I dug up a pen out of the bottom of my backpack, and an old test. I started to doodle on the back of the scrap.

I'd only had time to scrawl one row of diamonds when there was a sharp tap against my door.

I jumped, looking up, expecting Billy.

"What are you doing here, Bella?" Jacob growled.

I stared at him in blank astonishment.

Jacob had changed radically in the last weeks since I'd seen him. The first thing I noticed was his hair—his beautiful hair was all gone, cropped quite short, covering his head with an inky gloss like black satin. The planes of his face seemed to have hardened subtly, tightened…aged. His neck and his shoulders were different, too, thicker somehow. His hands, where they gripped the window frame, looked enormous, with the tendons and veins more prominent under the russet skin. But the physical changes were insignificant.

It was his expression that made him almost completely unrecognizable. The open, friendly smile was gone like the hair, the warmth in his dark eyes altered to a brooding resentment that was instantly disturbing. There was a darkness in Jacob now. Like my sun had imploded.

"Jacob?" I whispered.

He just stared at me, his eyes tense and angry.

I realized we weren't alone. Behind him stood four others; all tall and russet-skinned, black hair chopped short just like Jacob's. They could have been brothers—I couldn't even pick Embry out of the group. The resemblance was only intensified by the strikingly similar hostility in every pair of eyes.

Every pair but one. The oldest by several years, Sam stood in the very back, his face serene and sure. I had to swallow back the bile that rose in my throat. I wanted to take a swing at him. No, I wanted to do more than that. More than anything, I wanted to be fierce and deadly, someone no one would dare mess with. Someone who would scare Sam Uley silly.

I wanted to be a vampire.

The violent desire caught me off guard and knocked the wind out of me. It was the most forbidden of all wishes—even when I only wished it for a malicious reason like this, to gain an advantage over an enemy—because it was the most painful. That future was lost to me forever, had never really been within my grasp. I scrambled to gain control of myself while the hole in my chest ached hollowly.

"What do you want?" Jacob demanded, his expression growing more resentful as he watched the play of emotion across my face.

"I want to talk to you," I said in a weak voice. I tried to focus, but I was still reeling against the escape of my taboo dream.

"Go ahead," he hissed through his teeth. His glare was vicious. I'd never seen him look at anyone like that, least of all me. It hurt with a surprising intensity—a physical pain, a stabbing in my head.

"Alone!" I hissed, and my voice was stronger.

He looked behind him, and I knew where his eyes would go. Every one of them was turned for Sam's reaction.

Sam nodded once, his face unperturbed. He made a brief comment in an unfamiliar, liquid language—I could only be positive that it wasn't French or Spanish, but I guessed that it was Quileute. He turned and walked into Jacob's house. The others, Paul, Jared, and Embry, I assumed, followed him in.

"Okay." Jacob seemed a bit less furious when the others were gone. His face was a little calmer, but also more hopeless. His mouth seemed permanently pulled down at the corners.

I took a deep breath. “You know what I want to know.”

He didn’t answer. He just stared at me bitterly.

I stared back and the silence stretched on. The pain in his face unnerved me. I felt a lump beginning to build in my throat.

“Can we walk?” I asked while I could still speak.

He didn’t respond in any way; his face didn’t change.

I got out of the car, feeling unseen eyes behind the windows on me, and started walking toward the trees to the north. My feet squished in the damp grass and mud beside the road, and, as that was the only sound, at first I thought he wasn’t following me. But when I glanced around, he was right beside me, his feet having somehow found a less noisy path than mine.

I felt better in the fringe of trees, where Sam couldn’t possibly be watching. As we walked, I struggled for the right thing to say, but nothing came. I just got more and more angry that Jacob had gotten sucked in…that Billy had allowed this…that Sam was able to stand there so assured and calm….

Jacob suddenly picked up the pace, striding ahead of me easily with his long legs, and then swinging around to face me, planting himself in my path so I would have to stop too.

I was distracted by the overt grace of his movement. Jacob had been nearly as klutzy as me with his never-ending growth spurt. When did that change?

But Jacob didn’t give me time to think about it.

"Let's get this over with," he said in a hard, husky voice.

I waited. He knew what I wanted.

"It's not what you think." His voice was abruptly weary. "It's not what I thought—I was way off."

"So what is it, then?"

He studied my face for a long moment, speculating. The anger never completely left his eyes. "I can't tell you," he finally said.

My jaw tightened, and I spoke through my teeth. "I thought we were friends."

"We were." There was a slight emphasis on the past tense.

"But you don't need friends anymore," I said sourly. "You have Sam. Isn't that nice—you've always looked up to him so much."

"I didn't understand him before."

"And now you've seen the light. Hallelujah."

"It wasn't like I thought it was. This isn't Sam's fault. He's helping me as much as he can." His voice turned brittle and he looked over my head, past me, rage burning out from his eyes.

"He's helping you," I repeated dubiously. "Naturally."

But Jacob didn't seem to be listening. He was taking deep, deliberate breaths, trying to calm himself. He was so mad that his hands were shaking.

“Jacob, please,” I whispered. “Won’t you tell me what happened? Maybe I can help.”

“No one can help me now.” The words were a low moan; his voice broke.

“What did he do to you?” I demanded, tears collecting in my eyes. I reached out to him, as I had once before, stepping forward with my arms wide.

This time he cringed away, holding his hands up defensively. “Don’t touch me,” he whispered.

“Is Sam catching?” I mumbled. The stupid tears had escaped the corners of my eyes. I wiped them away with the back of my hand, and folded my arms across my chest.

“Stop blaming Sam.” The words came out fast, like a reflex. His hands reached up to twist around the hair that was no longer there, and then fell limply at his sides.

“Then who should I blame?” I retorted.

He halfway smiled; it was a bleak, twisted thing.

“You don’t want to hear that.”

“The hell I don’t!” I snapped. “I want to know, and I want to know now.”

“You’re wrong,” he snapped back.

“Don’t you dare tell me I’m wrong—I’m not the one who got brainwashed! Tell me now whose fault this all is, if it’s not your precious Sam!”

"You asked for it," he growled at me, eyes glinting hard. "If you want to blame someone, why don't you point your finger at those filthy, reeking bloodsuckers that you love so much?"

My mouth fell open and my breath came out with a whooshing sound. I was frozen in place, stabbed through with his double-edged words. The pain twisted in familiar patterns through my body, the jagged hole ripping me open from the inside out, but it was second place, background music to the chaos of my thoughts. I couldn't believe that I'd heard him correctly. There was no trace of indecision in his face. Only fury.

My mouth still hung wide.

"I told you that you didn't want to hear it," he said.

"I don't understand who you mean," I whispered.

He raised one eyebrow in disbelief. "I think you understand exactly who I mean. You're not going to make me say it, are you? I don't like hurting you."

"I don't understand who you mean," I repeated mechanically.

"The Cullens," he said slowly, drawing out the word, scrutinizing my face as he spoke it. "I saw that—I can see in your eyes what it does to you when I say their name."

I shook my head back and forth in denial, trying to clear it at the same time. How did he know this? And how did it have anything to do with Sam's cult? Was it a gang of vampire-haters? What was the point of forming such a society when no vampires lived in Forks anymore? Why would Jacob start believing the

stories about the Cullens now, when the evidence of them was long gone, never to return?

It took me too long to come up with the correct response. "Don't tell me you're listening to Billy's superstitious nonsense now," I said with a feeble attempt at mockery.

"He knows more than I gave him credit for."

"Be serious, Jacob."

He glared at me, his eyes critical.

"Superstitions aside," I said quickly. "I still don't see what you're accusing the…Cullens"—wince—"of. They left more than half a year ago. How can you blame them for what Sam is doing now?"

"Sam isn't doing anything, Bella. And I know they're gone. But sometimes…things are set in motion, and then it's too late."

"What's set in motion? What's too late? What are you blaming them for?"

He was suddenly right in my face, his fury glowing in his eyes. "For existing," he hissed.

I was surprised and distracted as the warning words came in Edward's voice again, when I wasn't even scared.

"Quiet now, Bella. Don't push him," Edward cautioned in my ear.

Ever since Edward's name had broken through the careful walls I'd buried it behind, I'd been unable to

lock it up again. It didn't hurt now—not during the precious seconds when I could hear his voice.

Jacob was fuming in front of me, quivering with anger.

I didn't understand why the Edward delusion was unexpectedly in my mind. Jacob was livid, but he was Jacob. There was no adrenaline, no danger.

"Give him a chance to calm down," Edward's voice insisted.

I shook my head in confusion. "You're being ridiculous," I told them both.

"Fine," Jacob answered, breathing deeply again. "I won't argue it with you. It doesn't matter anyway, the damage is done."

"What damage?"

He didn't flinch as I shouted the words in his face.

"Let's head back. There's nothing more to say."

I gaped. "There's everything more to say! You haven't said anything yet!"

He walked past me, striding back toward the house.

"I ran into Quil today," I yelled after him.

He paused midstep, but didn't turn.

"You remember your friend, Quil? Yeah, he's terrified."

Jacob whirled to face me. His expression was pained. “Quil” was all he said.

“He’s worried about you, too. He’s freaked out.”

Jacob stared past me with desperate eyes.

I goaded him further. “He’s frightened that he’s next.”

Jacob clutched at a tree for support, his face turning a strange shade of green under the red-brown surface. “He won’t be next,” Jacob muttered to himself. “He can’t be. It’s over now. This shouldn’t still be happening. Why? Why?” His fist slammed against the tree. It wasn’t a big tree, slender and only a few feet taller than Jacob. But it still surprised me when the trunk gave way and snapped off loudly under his blows.

Jacob stared at the sharp, broken point with shock that quickly turned to horror.

“I have to get back.” He whirled and stalked away so swiftly that I had to jog to keep up.

“Back to Sam!”

“That’s one way of looking at it,” it sounded like he said. He was mumbling and facing away.

I chased him back to the truck. “Wait!” I called as he turned toward the house.

He spun around to face me, and I saw that his hands were shaking again.

“Go home, Bella. I can’t hang out with you anymore.”

The silly, inconsequential hurt was incredibly potent. The tears welled up again. “Are you…breaking up with me?” The words were all wrong, but they were the best way I could think to phrase what I was asking. After all, what Jake and I had was more than any schoolyard romance. Stronger.

He barked out a bitter laugh. “Hardly. If that were the case, I’d say ‘Let’s stay friends.’ I can’t even say that.”

“Jacob…why? Sam won’t let you have other friends? Please, Jake. You promised. I need you!” The blank emptiness of my life before—before Jacob brought some semblance of reason back into it—reared up and confronted me. Loneliness choked in my throat.

“I’m sorry, Bella,” Jacob said each word distinctly in a cold voice that didn’t seem to belong to him.

I didn’t believe that this was really what Jacob wanted to say. It seemed like there was something else trying to be said through his angry eyes, but I couldn’t understand the message.

Maybe this wasn’t about Sam at all. Maybe this had nothing to do with the Cullens. Maybe he was just trying to pull himself out of a hopeless situation. Maybe I should let him do that, if that’s what was best for him. I should do that. It would be right.

But I heard my voice escaping in a whisper.

“I’m sorry that I couldn’t…before…I wish I could change how I feel about you, Jacob.” I was desperate, reaching, stretching the truth so far that it curved nearly into the shape of a lie. “Maybe…maybe I would change,” I whispered. “Maybe, if you gave me some time…just don’t quit on me now, Jake. I can’t take it.”

His face went from anger to agony in a second. One shaking hand reached out toward me.

“No. Don’t think like that, Bella, please. Don’t blame yourself, don’t think this is your fault. This one is all me. I swear, it’s not about you.”

“It’s not you, it’s me,” I whispered. “There’s a new one.”

“I mean it, Bella. I’m not . . .” he struggled, his voice going even huskier as he fought to control his emotion. His eyes were tortured. “I’m not good enough to be your friend anymore, or anything else. I’m not what I was before. I’m not good.”

“What?” I stared at him, confused and appalled. “What are you saying? You’re much better than I am, Jake. You are good! Who told you that you aren’t? Sam? It’s a vicious lie, Jacob! Don’t let him tell you that!” I was suddenly yelling again.

Jacob’s face went hard and flat. “No one had to tell me anything. I know what I am.”

“You’re my friend, that’s what you are! Jake—don’t!”

He was backing away from me.

“I’m sorry, Bella,” he said again; this time it was a broken mumble. He turned and almost ran into the house.

I was unable to move from where I stood. I stared at the little house; it looked too small to hold four large boys and two larger men. There was no reaction inside. No flutter at the edge of the curtain, no sound of voices or movement. It faced me vacantly.

The rain started to drizzle, stinging here and there against my skin. I couldn't take my eyes off the house. Jacob would come back. He had to.

The rain picked up, and so did the wind. The drops were no longer falling from above; they slanted at an angle from the west. I could smell the brine from the ocean. My hair whipped in my face, sticking to the wet places and tangling in my lashes. I waited.

Finally the door opened, and I took a step forward in relief.

Billy rolled his chair into the door frame. I could see no one behind him.

"Charlie just called, Bella. I told him you were on your way home." His eyes were full of pity.

The pity made it final somehow. I didn't comment. I just turned robotically and climbed in my truck. I'd left the windows open and the seats were slick and wet. It didn't matter. I was already soaked.

Not as bad! Not as bad! my mind tried to comfort me. It was true. This wasn't as bad. This wasn't the end of the world, not again. This was just the end of what little peace there was left behind. That was all.

Not as bad, I agreed, then added, but bad enough.

I'd thought Jake had been healing the hole in me—or at least plugging it up, keeping it from hurting me so much. I'd been wrong. He'd just been carving out his own hole, so that I was now riddled through like Swiss cheese. I wondered why I didn't crumble into pieces.

Charlie was waiting on the porch. As I rolled to a stop, he walked out to meet me.

"Billy called. He said you got in fight with Jake—said you were pretty upset," he explained as he opened my door for me.

Then he looked at my face. A kind of horrified recognition registered in his expression. I tried to feel my face from the inside out, to know what he was seeing. My face felt empty and cold, and I realized what it would remind him of.

"That's not exactly how it happened," I muttered.

Charlie put his arm around me and helped me out of the car. He didn't comment on my sodden clothes.

"Then what did happen?" he asked when we were inside. He pulled the afghan off the back of the sofa as he spoke and wrapped it around my shoulders. I realized I was shivering still.

My voice was lifeless. "Sam Uley says Jacob can't be my friend anymore."

Charlie shot me a strange look. "Who told you that?"

"Jacob," I stated, though that wasn't exactly what he'd said. It was still true.

Charlie's eyebrows pulled together. "You really think there's something wrong with the Uley kid?"

"I know there is. Jacob wouldn't tell me what, though." I could hear the water from my clothes dripping to the floor and splashing on the linoleum. "I'm going to go change."

Charlie was lost in thought. “Okay,” he said absently.

I decided to take a shower because I was so cold, but the hot water didn’t seem to affect the temperature of my skin. I was still freezing when I gave up and shut the water off. In the sudden quiet, I could hear Charlie talking to someone downstairs. I wrapped a towel around me, and cracked the bathroom door.

Charlie’s voice was angry. “I’m not buying that. It doesn’t make any sense.”

It was quiet then, and I realized he was on the phone. A minute passed.

“Don’t you put this on Bella!” Charlie suddenly shouted. I jumped. When he spoke again, his voice was careful and lower. “Bella’s made it very clear all along that she and Jacob were just friends….Well, if that was it, then why didn’t you say so at first? No, Billy, I think she’s right about this….Because I know my daughter, and if she says Jacob was scared before—” He was cut off mid-sentence, and when he answered he was almost shouting again.

“What do you mean I don’t know my daughter as well as I think I do!” He listened for a brief second, and his response was almost too low for me to hear. “If you think I’m going to remind her about that, then you had better think again. She’s only just starting to get over it, and mostly because of Jacob, I think. If whatever Jacob has going on with this Sam character sends her back into that depression, then Jacob is going to have to answer to me. You’re my friend, Billy, but this is hurting my family.”

There was another break for Billy to respond.

“You got that right—those boys set one toe out of line and I’m going to know about it. We’ll be keeping an eye on the situation, you can be sure of that.” He was no longer Charlie; he was Chief Swan now.

“Fine. Yeah. Goodbye.” The phone slammed into the cradle.

I tiptoed quickly across the hall into my room. Charlie was muttering angrily in the kitchen.

So Billy was going to blame me. I was leading Jacob on and he’d finally had enough.

It was strange, for I’d feared that myself, but after the last thing Jacob had said this afternoon, I didn’t believe it anymore. There was much more to this than an unrequited crush, and it surprised me that Billy would stoop to claiming that. It made me think that whatever secret they were keeping was bigger than I’d been imagining. At least Charlie was on my side now.

I put my pajamas on and crawled into bed. Life seemed dark enough at the moment that I let myself cheat. The hole—holes now—were already aching, so why not? I pulled out the memory—not a real memory that would hurt too much, but the false memory of Edward’s voice in my mind this afternoon—and played it over and over in my head until I fell asleep with the tears still streaming calmly down my empty face.

It was a new dream tonight. Rain was falling and Jacob was walking soundlessly beside me, though beneath my feet the ground crunched like dry gravel. But he wasn’t my Jacob; he was the new, bitter, graceful Jacob. The smooth suppleness of his walk reminded me of someone else, and, as I watched, his features started to change. The russet color of his

skin leached away, leaving his face pale white like bone. His eyes turned gold, and then crimson, and then back to gold again. His shorn hair twisted in the breeze, turning bronze where the wind touched it. And his face became so beautiful that it shattered my heart. I reached for him, but he took a step away, raising his hands like a shield. And then Edward vanished.

I wasn't sure, when I woke in the dark, if I'd just begun crying, or if my tears had run while I slept and simply continued now. I stared at my dark ceiling. I could feel that it was the middle of the night—I was still half-asleep, maybe more than half. I closed my eyes wearily and prayed for a dreamless sleep.

That's when I heard the noise that must have wakened me in the first place. Something sharp scraped along the length of my window with a high-pitched squeal, like fingernails against the glass.

# Chapter 12

## INTRUDER

My eyes flew wide open without fright, though I was so exhausted and muddled that I was not yet positive whether I was awake or asleep.

Something scratched against my window again with the same thin, high-pitched sound.

Confused and clumsy with sleep, I stumbled out of my bed and to the window, blinking the lingering tears from my eyes on the way.

A huge, dark shape wobbled erratically on the other side of the glass, lurching toward me like it was going to smash right through. I staggered back, terrified, my throat closing around a scream.

Victoria.

She'd come for me.

I was dead.

Not Charlie, too!

I choked back the building scream. I would have to keep quiet through this. Somehow. I had to keep Charlie from coming to investigate….

And then a familiar, husky voice called from the dark shape.

"Bella!" it hissed. "Ouch! Damn it, open the window! OUCH!"

I needed two seconds to shake off the horror before I could move, but then I hurried to the window and shoved the glass out of the way. The clouds were dimly lit from behind, enough for me to make sense of the shapes.

“What are you doing?” I gasped.

Jacob was clinging precariously to the top of the spruce that grew in the middle of Charlie’s little front yard. His weight had bowed the tree toward the house and he now swung—his legs dangling twenty feet above the ground—not a yard away from me. The thin branches at the tip of the tree scraped against the side of the house again with a grating squeal.

“I’m trying to keep”— he huffed, shifting his weight as the treetop bounced him—“my promise!”

I blinked my wet blurry eyes, suddenly sure that I was dreaming.

“When did you ever promise to kill yourself falling out of Charlie’s tree?”

He snorted, unamused, swinging his legs to improve his balance. “Get out of the way,” he ordered.

“What?”

He swung his legs again, backwards and forward, increasing his momentum. I realized what he was trying to do.

“No, Jake!”

But I ducked to the side, because it was too late. With a grunt, he launched himself toward my open window.

Another scream built in my throat as I waited for him to fall to his death—or at least maim himself against the wooden siding. To my shock, he swung agilely into my room, landing on the balls of his feet with a low thud.

We both looked to the door automatically, holding our breath, waiting to see if the noise had woken Charlie. A short moment of silence passed, and then we heard the muffled sound of Charlie's snore.

A wide grin spread slowly across Jacob's face; he seemed extremely pleased with himself. It wasn't the grin that I knew and loved—it was a new grin, one that was a bitter mockery of his old sincerity, on the new face that belonged to Sam.

That was a bit much for me.

I'd cried myself to sleep over this boy. His harsh rejection had punched a painful new hole in what was left of my chest. He'd left a new nightmare behind him, like an infection in a sore—the insult after the injury. And now he was here in my room, smirking at me as if none of that had passed. Worse than that, even though his arrival had been noisy and awkward, it reminded me of when Edward used to sneak in through my window at night, and the reminder picked viciously at the unhealed wounds.

All of this, coupled with the fact that I was dog-tired, did not put me in a friendly mood.

"Get out!" I hissed, putting as much venom into the whisper as I could.

He blinked, his face going blank with surprise.

"No," he protested. "I came to apologize."

"I don't accept!"

I tried to shove him back out the window—after all, if this was a dream, it wouldn't really hurt him. It was useless, though. I didn't budge him an inch. I dropped my hands quickly, and stepped away from him.

He wasn't wearing a shirt, though the air blowing in the window was cold enough to make me shiver, and it made me uncomfortable to have my hands on his bare chest. His skin was burning hot, like his head had been the last time I'd touched him. Like he was still sick with the fever.

He didn't look sick. He looked huge. He leaned over me, so big that he blacked out the window, tongue-tied by my furious reaction.

Suddenly, it was just more than I could handle—it felt as if all of my sleepless nights were crashing down on me en masse. I was so brutally tired that I thought I might collapse right there on the floor. I swayed unsteadily, and struggled to keep my eyes open.

"Bella?" Jacob whispered anxiously. He caught my elbow as I swayed again, and steered me back to the bed. My legs gave out when I reached the edge, and I plopped into a limp heap on the mattress.

"Hey, are you okay?" Jacob asked, worry creasing his forehead.

I looked up at him, the tears not yet dried on my cheeks. "Why in the world would I be okay, Jacob?"

Anguish replaced some of the bitterness in his face. "Right," he agreed, and took a deep breath. "Crap. Well…I—I'm so sorry, Bella." The apology was sincere,

no doubt about it, though there was still an angry twist to his features.

“Why did you come here? I don’t want apologies from you, Jake.”

“I know,” he whispered. “But I couldn’t leave things the way I did this afternoon. That was horrible. I’m sorry.”

I shook my head wearily. “I don’t understand anything.”

“I know. I want to explain—” He broke off suddenly, his mouth open, almost like something had cut off his air. Then he sucked in a deep breath. “But I can’t explain,” he said, still angry. “I wish I could.”

I let my head fall into my hands. My question came out muffled by my arm. “Why?”

He was quiet for a moment. I twisted my head to the side—too tired to hold it up—to see his expression. It surprised me. His eyes were squinted, his teeth clenched, his forehead wrinkled in effort.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

He exhaled heavily, and I realized he’d been holding his breath, too. “I can’t do it,” he muttered, frustrated.

“Do what?”

He ignored my question. “Look, Bella, haven’t you ever had a secret that you couldn’t tell anyone?”

He looked at me with knowing eyes, and my thoughts jumped immediately to the Cullens. I hoped my expression didn’t look guilty.

"Something you felt like you had to keep from Charlie, from your mom…?" he pressed. "Something you won't even talk about with me? Not even now?"

I felt my eyes tighten. I didn't answer his question, though I knew he would take that as a confirmation.

"Can you understand that I might have the same kind of…situation?" He was struggling again, seeming to fight for the right words. "Sometimes, loyalty gets in the way of what you want to do. Sometimes, it's not your secret to tell."

So, I couldn't argue with that. He was exactly right—I had a secret that wasn't mine to tell, yet a secret I felt bound to protect. A secret that, suddenly, he seemed to know all about.

I still didn't see how it applied to him, or Sam, or Billy. What was it to them, now that the Cullens were gone?

"I don't know why you came here, Jacob, if you were just going to give me riddles instead of answers."

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "This is so frustrating."

We looked at each other for a long moment in the dark room, both our faces hopeless.

"The part that kills me," he said abruptly, "is that you already know. I already told you everything!"

"What are you talking about?"

He sucked in a startled breath, and then leaned toward me, his face shifting from hopelessness to blazing intensity in a second. He stared fiercely into my eyes, and his voice was fast and eager. He spoke

the words right into my face; his breath was as hot as his skin.

“I think I see a way to make this work out—because you know this, Bella! I can’t tell you, but if you guessed it! That would let me right off the hook!”

“You want me to guess? Guess what?”

“My secret! You can do it—you know the answer!”

I blinked twice, trying to clear my head. I was so tired. Nothing he said made sense.

He took in my blank expression, and then his face tensed with effort again. “Hold on, let me see if I give you some help,” he said. Whatever he was trying to do, it was so hard he was panting.

“Help?” I asked, trying to keep up. My lids wanted to slip closed, but I forced them open.

“Yeah,” he said, breathing hard. “Like clues.”

He took my face in his enormous, too-warm hands and held it just a few inches from his. He stared into my eyes while he whispered, as if to communicate something besides the words he spoke.

“Remember the first day we met—on the beach in La Push?”

“Of course I do.”

“Tell me about it.”

I took a deep breath and tried to concentrate. “You asked about my truck….”

He nodded, urging me on.

“We talked about the Rabbit....”

“Keep going.”

“We went for a walk down the beach....” My cheeks were growing warm under his palms as I remembered, but he wouldn’t notice, hot as his skin was. I’d asked him to walk with me, flirting ineptly but successfully, in order to pump him for information.

He was nodding, anxious for more.

My voice was nearly soundless. “You told me scary stories...Quileute legends.”

He closed his eyes and opened them again. “Yes.” The word was tense, fervent, like he was on the edge of something vital. He spoke slowly, making each word distinct. “Do you remember what I said?”

Even in the dark, he must be able to see the change in the color of my face. How could I ever forget that? Without realizing what he was doing, Jacob had told me exactly what I needed to know that day—that Edward was a vampire.

He looked at me with eyes that knew too much. “Think hard,” he told me.

“Yes, I remember,” I breathed.

He inhaled deeply, struggling. “Do you remember all the stor—” He couldn’t finish the question. His mouth popped open like something had stuck in his throat.

“All the stories?” I asked.

He nodded mutely.

My head churned. Only one story really mattered. I knew he'd begun with others, but I couldn't remember the inconsequential prelude, especially not while my brain was so clouded with exhaustion. I started to shake my head.

Jacob groaned and jumped off the bed. He pressed his fists against his forehead and breathed fast and angry. "You know this, you know this," he muttered to himself.

"Jake? Jake, please, I'm exhausted. I'm no good at this right now. Maybe in the morning . . ."

He took a steadying breath and nodded. "Maybe it will come back to you. I guess I understand why you only remember the one story," he added in a sarcastic, bitter tone. He plunked back onto the mattress beside me. "Do you mind if I ask you a question about that?" he asked, still sarcastic. "I've been dying to know."

"A question about what?" I asked warily.

"About the vampire story I told you."

I stared at him with guarded eyes, unable to answer. He asked his question anyway.

"Did you honestly not know?" he asked me, his voice turning husky. "Was I the one who told you what he was?"

How did he know this? Why did he decide to believe, why now? My teeth clenched together. I stared back at him, no intention of speaking. He could see that.

"See what I mean about loyalty?" he murmured, even huskier now. "It's the same for me, only worse. You can't imagine how tight I'm bound…."

I didn't like that—didn't like the way his eyes closed as if he were in pain when he spoke of being bound. More than dislike—I realized I hated it, hated anything that caused him pain. Hated it fiercely.

Sam's face filled my mind.

For me, this was all essentially voluntary. I protected the Cullens' secret out of love; unrequited, but true. For Jacob, it didn't seem to be that way.

"Isn't there any way for you to get free?" I whispered, touching the rough edge at the back of his shorn hair.

His hands began to tremble, but he didn't open his eyes. "No. I'm in this for life. A life sentence." A bleak laugh. "Longer, maybe."

"No, Jake," I moaned. "What if we ran away? Just you and me. What if we left home, and left Sam behind?"

"It's not something I can run away from, Bella," he whispered. "I would run with you, though, if I could." His shoulders were shaking now, too. He took a deep breath. "Look, I've got to leave."

"Why?"

"For one thing, you look like you're going to pass out at any second. You need your sleep—I need you firing on all pistons. You're going to figure this out, you have to."

"And why else?"

He frowned. “I had to sneak out—I’m not supposed to see you. They’ve got to be wondering where I am.” His mouth twisted. “I suppose I should go let them know.”

“You don’t have to tell them anything,” I hissed.

“All the same, I will.”

The anger flashed hot inside me. “I hate them!”

Jacob looked at me with wide eyes, surprised. “No, Bella. Don’t hate the guys. It’s not Sam’s or any of the others’ faults. I told you before—it’s me. Sam is actually…well, incredibly cool. Jared and Paul are great, too, though Paul is kind of…And Embry’s always been my friend. Nothing’s changed there—the only thing that hasn’t changed. I feel really bad about the things I used to think about Sam….”

Sam was incredibly cool? I glared at him in disbelief, but let it go.

“Then why aren’t you supposed to see me?” I demanded.

“It’s not safe,” he mumbled, looking down.

His words sent a thrill of fear through me.

Did he know that, too? Nobody knew that besides me. But he was right—it was the middle of the night, the perfect time for hunting. Jacob shouldn’t be here in my room. If someone came for me, I had to be alone.

“If I thought it was too…too risky,” he whispered, “I wouldn’t have come. But Bella,” he looked at me again, “I made you a promise. I had no idea it would be so hard to keep, but that doesn’t mean I’m not going to try.”

He saw the incomprehension in my face. “After that stupid movie,” he reminded me. “I promised you that I wouldn’t ever hurt you….So I really blew it this afternoon, didn’t I?”

“I know you didn’t want to do it, Jake. It’s okay.”

“Thanks, Bella.” He took my hand. “I’m going to do what I can to be here for you, just like I promised.” He grinned at me suddenly. The grin was not mine, nor Sam’s, but some strange combination of the two. “It would really help if you could figure this out on your own, Bella. Put some honest effort into it.”

I made a weak grimace. “I’ll try.”

“And I’ll try to see you soon.” He sighed. “And they’ll try to talk me out of that.”

“Don’t listen to them.”

“I’ll try.” He shook his head, as if he doubted his success. “Come and tell me as soon as you figure it out.” Something occurred to him just then, something that made his hands shake. “If you…if you want to.”

“Why wouldn’t I want to see you?”

His face turned hard and bitter, one hundred percent the face that belonged to Sam. “Oh, I can think of a reason,” he said in a harsh tone. “Look, I really have to go. Could you do something for me?”

I just nodded, frightened of the change in him.

“At least call me—if you don’t want to see me again. Let me know if it’s like that.”

“That won’t happen—”

He raised one hand, cutting me off. “Just let me know.”

He stood and headed for the window.

“Don’t be an idiot, Jake,” I complained. “You’ll break your leg. Use the door. Charlie’s not going to catch you.”

“I won’t get hurt,” he muttered, but he turned for the door. He hesitated as he passed me, staring at me with an expression like something was stabbing him. He held one hand out, pleading.

I took his hand, and suddenly he yanked me—too roughly—right off the bed so that I thudded against his chest.

“Just in case,” he muttered against my hair, crushing me in a bear hug that about broke my ribs.

“Can’t—breathe!” I gasped.

He dropped me at once, keeping one hand at my waist so I didn’t fall over. He pushed me, more gently this time, back down on the bed.

“Get some sleep, Bells. You’ve got to get your head working. I know you can do this. I need you to understand. I won’t lose you, Bella. Not for this.”

He was to the door in one stride, opening it quietly, and then disappearing through it. I listened for him to hit the squeaky step in the stairs, but there was no sound.

I lay back on my bed, my head spinning. I was too confused, too worn out. I closed my eyes, trying to

make sense of it, only to be swallowed up by unconsciousness so swiftly that it was disorienting.

It was not the peaceful, dreamless sleep I'd yearned for—of course not. I was in the forest again, and I started to wander the way I always did.

I quickly became aware that this was not the same dream as usual. For one thing, I felt no compulsion to wander or to search; I was merely wandering out of habit, because that was what was usually expected of me here. Actually, this wasn't even the same forest. The smell was different, and the light, too. It smelled, not like the damp earth of the woods, but like the brine of the ocean. I couldn't see the sky; still, it seemed like the sun must be shining—the leaves above were bright jade green.

This was the forest around La Push—near the beach there, I was sure of it. I knew that if I found the beach, I would be able to see the sun, so I hurried forward, following the faint sound of waves in the distance.

And then Jacob was there. He grabbed my hand, pulling me back toward the blackest part of the forest.

"Jacob, what's wrong?" I asked. His face was the frightened face of a boy, and his hair was beautiful again, swept back into a ponytail on the nape of his neck. He yanked with all his strength, but I resisted; I didn't want to go into the dark.

"Run, Bella, you have to run!" he whispered, terrified.

The abrupt wave of déjà vu was so strong it nearly woke me up.

I knew why I recognized this place now. It was because I'd been here before, in another dream. A million years ago, part of a different life entirely. This was the dream I'd had the night after I'd walked with Jacob on the beach, the first night I knew that Edward was a vampire. Reliving that day with Jacob must have dredged this dream out of my buried memories.

Detached from the dream now, I waited for it to play out. A light was coming toward me from the beach. In just a moment, Edward would walk through the trees, his skin faintly glowing and his eyes black and dangerous. He would beckon to me, and smile. He would be beautiful as an angel, and his teeth would be pointed and sharp....

But I was getting ahead of myself. Something else had to happen first.

Jacob dropped my hand and yelped. Shaking and twitching, he fell to the ground at my feet.

"Jacob!" I screamed, but he was gone.

In his place was an enormous, red-brown wolf with dark, intelligent eyes.

The dream veered off course, like a train jumping the tracks.

This was not the same wolf that I'd dreamed of in another life. This was the great russet wolf I'd stood half a foot from in the meadow, just a week ago. This wolf was gigantic, monstrous, bigger than a bear.

This wolf stared intently at me, trying to convey something vital with his intelligent eyes. The black-brown, familiar eyes of Jacob Black.

I woke screaming at the top of my lungs.

I almost expected Charlie to come check on me this time. This wasn't my usual screaming. I buried my head in my pillow and tried to muffle the hysterics that my screams were building into. I pressed the cotton tight against my face, wondering if I couldn't also somehow smother the connection I'd just made.

But Charlie didn't come in, and eventually I was able to strangle the strange screeching coming out of my throat.

I remembered it all now—every word that Jacob had said to me that day on the beach, even the part before he got to the vampires, the "cold ones." Especially that first part.

"Do you know any of our old stories, about where we came from—the Quileutes, I mean?" he asked.

"Not really," I admitted.

"Well, there are lots of legends, some of them claiming to date back to the Flood—supposedly, the ancient Quileutes tied their canoes to the tops of the tallest trees on the mountain to survive, like Noah and the ark." He smiled then, to show me how little stock he put in the histories. "Another legend claims that we descended from wolves—and that the wolves are our brothers still. It's against tribal law to kill them.

"Then there are the stories about the cold ones." His voice dropped a little lower.

"The cold ones?"

"Yes. There are stories of the cold ones as old as the wolf legends, and some much more recent. According

to legend, my own great-grandfather knew some of them. He was the one who made the treaty that kept them off our land." Jacob rolled his eyes.

"Your great-grandfather?"

"He was a tribal elder, like my father. You see, the cold ones are the natural enemies of the wolf—well, not the wolf really, but the wolves that turn into men, like our ancestors. You would call them werewolves."

"Werewolves have enemies?"

"Only one."

There was something stuck in my throat, choking me. I tried to swallow it down, but it was lodged there, unmoving. I tried to spit it out.

"Werewolf," I gasped.

Yes, that was the word that I was choking on.

The whole world lurched, tilting the wrong way on its axis.

What kind of a place was this? Could a world really exist where ancient legends went wandering around the borders of tiny, insignificant towns, facing down mythical monsters? Did this mean every impossible fairy tale was grounded somewhere in absolute truth? Was there anything sane or normal at all, or was everything just magic and ghost stories?

I clutched my head in my hands, trying to keep it from exploding.

A small, dry voice in the back of my mind asked me what the big deal was. Hadn't I already accepted the

existence of vampires long ago—and without all the hysterics that time?

Exactly, I wanted to scream back at the voice. Wasn't one myth enough for anyone, enough for a lifetime?

Besides, there'd never been one moment that I wasn't completely aware that Edward Cullen was above and beyond the ordinary. It wasn't such a surprise to find out what he was—because he so obviously was something.

But Jacob? Jacob, who was just Jacob, and nothing more than that? Jacob, my friend? Jacob, the only human I'd ever been able to relate to….

And he wasn't even human.

I fought the urge to scream again.

What did this say about me?

I knew the answer to that one. It said that there was something deeply wrong with me. Why else would my life be filled with characters from horror movies? Why else would I care so much about them that it would tear big chunks right out of my chest when they went off along their mythical ways?

In my head, everything spun and shifted, rearranging so that things that had meant one thing before, now meant something else.

There was no cult. There had never been a cult, never been a gang. No, it was much worse than that. It was a pack.

A pack of five mind-blowingly gigantic, multihued werewolves that had stalked right past me in Edward's meadow….

Suddenly, I was in a frantic hurry. I glanced at the clock—it was way too early and I didn't care. I had to go to La Push now. I had to see Jacob so he could tell me that I hadn't lost my mind altogether.

I pulled on the first clean clothes I could find, not bothering to be sure they matched, and took the stairs two at a time. I almost ran into Charlie as I skidded into the hallway, headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" he asked, as surprised to see me as I was to see him. "Do you know what time it is?"

"Yeah. I have to go see Jacob."

"I thought the thing with Sam—"

"That doesn't matter, I have to talk to him right now."

"It's pretty early." He frowned when my expression didn't change. "Don't you want breakfast?"

"Not hungry." The words flew through my lips. He was blocking my path to the exit. I considered ducking around him and making a run for it, but I knew I would have to explain that to him later. "I'll be back soon, okay?"

Charlie frowned. "Straight to Jacob's house, right? No stops on the way?"

"Of course not, where would I stop?" My words were running together in my hurry.

"I don't know," he admitted. "It's just…well, there's been another attack—the wolves again. It was real close to the resort by the hot springs—there's a witness this time. The victim was only a dozen yards from the road when he disappeared. His wife saw a huge gray wolf just a few minutes later, while she was searching for him, and ran for help."

My stomach dropped like I'd hit a corkscrew on a roller coaster. "A wolf attacked him?"

"There's no sign of him—just a little blood again." Charlie's face was pained. "The rangers are going out armed, taking armed volunteers. There're a lot of hunters who are eager to be involved—there's a reward being offered for wolf carcasses. That's going to mean a lot of firepower out there in the forest, and it worries me." He shook his head. "When people get too excited, accidents happen…."

"They're going to shoot the wolves?" My voice shot through three octaves.

"What else can we do? What's wrong?" he asked, his tense eyes studying my face. I felt faint; I must be whiter than usual. "You aren't turning into a tree-hugger on me, are you?"

I couldn't answer. If he hadn't been watching me, I would have put my head between my knees. I'd forgotten about the missing hikers, the bloody paw prints….I hadn't connected those facts to my first realization.

"Look, honey, don't let this scare you. Just stay in town or on the highway—no stops—okay?"

"Okay," I repeated in a weak voice.

"I've got to go."

I looked at him closely for the first time, and saw that he had his gun strapped to his waist and hiking boots on.

"You aren't going out there after the wolves, are you, Dad?"

"I've got to help, Bells. People are disappearing."

My voice shot up again, almost hysterical now. "No! No, don't go. It's too dangerous!"

"I've got to do my job, kid. Don't be such a pessimist—I'll be fine." He turned for the door, and held it open. "You leaving?"

I hesitated, my stomach still spinning in uncomfortable loops. What could I say to stop him? I was too dizzy to think of a solution.

"Bells?"

"Maybe it's too early to go to La Push," I whispered.

"I agree," he said, and he stepped out into the rain, shutting the door behind him.

As soon as he was out of sight, I dropped to the floor and put my head between my knees.

Should I go after Charlie? What would I say?

And what about Jacob? Jacob was my best friend; I needed to warn him. If he really was a—I cringed and forced myself to think the word—werewolf (and I knew it was true, I could feel it), then people would be shooting at him! I needed to tell him and his friends

that people would try to kill them if they went running around like gigantic wolves. I needed to tell them to stop.

They had to stop! Charlie was out there in the woods. Would they care about that? I wondered….Up until now, only strangers had disappeared. Did that mean anything, or was it just chance?

I needed to believe that Jacob, at least, would care about that.

Either way, I had to warn him.

Or…did I?

Jacob was my best friend, but was he a monster, too? A real one? A bad one? Should I warn him, if he and his friends were…were murderers? If they were out slaughtering innocent hikers in cold blood? If they were truly creatures from a horror movie in every sense, would it be wrong to protect them?

It was inevitable that I would have to compare Jacob and his friends to the Cullens. I wrapped my arms around my chest, fighting the hole, while I thought of them.

I didn't know anything about werewolves, clearly. I would have expected something closer to the movies—big hairy half-men creatures or something—if I'd expected anything at all. So I didn't know what made them hunt, whether hunger or thirst or just a desire to kill. It was hard to judge, not knowing that.

But it couldn't be worse than what the Cullens endured in their quest to be good. I thought of Esme—the tears started when I pictured her kind, lovely face—and how, as motherly and loving as she

was, she'd had to hold her nose, all ashamed, and run from me when I was bleeding. It couldn't be harder than that. I thought of Carlisle, the centuries upon centuries that he had struggled to teach himself to ignore blood, so that he could save lives as a doctor. Nothing could be harder than that.

The werewolves had chosen a different path.

Now, what should I choose?

# Chapter 13

## KILLER

If it was anyone but Jacob, I thought to myself, shaking my head as I drove down the forest-lined highway to La Push.

I still wasn't sure if I was doing the right thing, but I'd made a compromise with myself.

I couldn't condone what Jacob and his friends, his pack, were doing. I understood now what he'd said last night—that I might not want to see him again—and I could have called him as he'd suggested, but that felt cowardly. I owed him a face-to-face conversation, at least. I would tell him to his face that I couldn't just overlook what was going on. I couldn't be friends with a killer and say nothing, let the killing continue… That would make me a monster, too.

But I couldn't not warn him, either. I had to do what I could to protect him.

I pulled up to the Blacks' house with my lips pressed together into a hard line. It was bad enough that my best friend was a werewolf. Did he have to be a monster, too?

The house was dark, no lights in the windows, but I didn't care if I woke them. My fist thudded against the front door with angry energy; the sound reverberated through the walls.

"Come in," I heard Billy call after a minute, and a light flicked on.

I twisted the knob; it was unlocked. Billy was leaning around an open doorway just off the little kitchen, a bathrobe around his shoulders, not in his chair yet. When he saw who it was, his eyes widened briefly, and then his face turned stoic.

"Well, good morning, Bella. What are you doing up so early?"

"Hey, Billy. I need to talk to Jake—where is he?"

"Um…I don't really know," he lied, straight-faced.

"Do you know what Charlie is doing this morning?" I demanded, sick of the stalling.

"Should I?"

"He and half the other men in town are all out in the woods with guns, hunting giant wolves."

Billy's expression flickered, and then went blank.

"So I'd like to talk to Jake about that, if you don't mind," I continued.

Billy pursed his thick lips for a long moment. "I'd bet he's still asleep," he finally said, nodding toward the tiny hallway off the front room. "He's out late a lot these days. Kid needs his rest—probably you shouldn't wake him."

"It's my turn," I muttered under my breath as I stalked to the hallway. Billy sighed.

Jacob's tiny closet of a room was the only door in the yard-long hallway. I didn't bother to knock. I threw the door open; it slammed against the wall with a bang.

Jacob—still wearing just the same black cut-off sweats he'd worn last night—was stretched diagonally across the double bed that took up all of his room but a few inches around the edges. Even on a slant, it wasn't long enough; his feet hung off the one end and his head off the other. He was fast asleep, snoring lightly with his mouth hanging open. The sound of the door hadn't even made him twitch.

His face was peaceful with deep sleep, all the angry lines smoothed out. There were circles under his eyes that I hadn't noticed before. Despite his ridiculous size, he looked very young now, and very weary. Pity shook me.

I stepped back out, and shut the door quietly behind me.

Billy stared with curious, guarded eyes as I walked slowly back into the front room.

"I think I'll let him get some rest."

Billy nodded, and then we gazed at each other for a minute. I was dying to ask him about his part in this. What did he think of what his son had become? But I knew how he'd supported Sam from the very beginning, and so I supposed the murders must not bother him. How he justified that to himself I couldn't imagine.

I could see many questions for me in his dark eyes, but he didn't voice them either.

"Look," I said, breaking the loud silence. "I'll be down at the beach for a while. When he wakes up, tell him I'm waiting for him, okay?"

"Sure, sure," Billy agreed.

I wondered if he really would. Well, if he didn't, I'd tried, right?

I drove down to First Beach and parked in the empty dirt lot. It was still dark—the gloomy predawn of a cloudy day—and when I cut the headlights it was hard to see. I had to let my eyes adjust before I could find the path that led through the tall hedge of weeds. It was colder here, with the wind whipping off the black water, and I shoved my hands deep into the pockets of my winter jacket. At least the rain had stopped.

I paced down the beach toward the north seawall. I couldn't see St. James or the other islands, just the vague shape of the water's edge. I picked my way carefully across the rocks, watching out for driftwood that might trip me.

I found what I was looking for before I realized I was looking for it. It materialized out of the gloom when it was just a few feet away: a long bone-white driftwood tree stranded deep on the rocks. The roots twisted up at the seaward end, like a hundred brittle tentacles. I couldn't be sure that it was the same tree where Jacob and I had had our first conversation—a conversation that had begun so many different, tangled threads of my life—but it seemed to be in about the same place. I sat down where I'd sat before, and stared out across the invisible sea.

Seeing Jacob like that—innocent and vulnerable in sleep—had stolen all my revulsion, dissolved all my anger. I still couldn't turn a blind eye to what was happening, like Billy seemed to, but I couldn't condemn Jacob for it either. Love didn't work that way, I decided. Once you cared about a person, it was impossible to be logical about them anymore. Jacob

was my friend whether he killed people or not. And I didn't know what I was going to do about that.

When I pictured him sleeping so peacefully, I felt an overpowering urge to protect him. Completely illogical.

Illogical or not, I brooded over the memory his peaceful face, trying to come up with some answer, some way to shelter him, while the sky slowly turned gray.

"Hi, Bella."

Jacob's voice came from the darkness and made me jump. It was soft, almost shy, but I'd been expecting some forewarning from the noisy rocks, and so it still startled me. I could see his silhouette against the coming sunrise—it looked enormous.

"Jake?"

He stood several paces away, shifting his weight from foot to foot anxiously.

"Billy told me you came by—didn't take you very long, did it? I knew you could figure it out."

"Yeah, I remember the right story now," I whispered.

It was quiet for a long moment and, though it was still too dark to see well, my skin prickled as if his eyes were searching my face. There must have been enough light for him to read my expression, because when he spoke again, his voice was suddenly acidic.

"You could have just called," he said harshly.

I nodded. "I know."

Jacob started pacing along the rocks. If I listened very hard, I could just hear the gentle brush of his feet on the rocks behind the sound of the waves. The rocks had clattered like castanets for me.

“Why did you come?” he demanded, not halting his angry stride.

“I thought it would be better face-to-face.”

He snorted. “Oh, much better.”

“Jacob, I have to warn you—”

“About the rangers and the hunters? Don’t worry about it. We already know.”

“Don’t worry about it?” I demanded in disbelief. “Jake, they’ve got guns! They’re setting traps and offering rewards and—”

“We can take care of ourselves,” he growled, still pacing. “They’re not going to catch anything. They’re only making it more difficult—they’ll start disappearing soon enough, too.”

“Jake!” I hissed.

“What? It’s just a fact.”

My voice was pale with revulsion. “How can you…feel that way? You know these people. Charlie’s out there!” The thought made my stomach twist.

He came to an abrupt stop. “What more can we do?” he retorted.

The sun turned the clouds a slivery pink above us. I could see his expression now; it was angry, frustrated, betrayed.

“Could you…well, try to not be a…werewolf?” I suggested in a whisper.

He threw his hands up in the air. “Like I have a choice about it!” he shouted. “And how would that help anything, if you’re worried about people disappearing?”

“I don’t understand you.”

He glared at me, his eyes narrowing and his mouth twisting into a snarl. “You know what makes me so mad I could just spit?”

I flinched away from his hostile expression. He seemed to be waiting for an answer, so I shook my head.

“You’re such a hypocrite, Bella—there you sit, terrified of me! How is that fair?” His hands shook with anger.

“Hypocrite? How does being afraid of a monster make me a hypocrite?”

“Ugh!” he groaned, pressing his trembling fists to his temples and squeezing his eyes shut. “Would you listen to yourself?”

“What?”

He took two steps toward me, leaning over me and glaring with fury. “Well, I’m so sorry that I can’t be the right kind of monster for you, Bella. I guess I’m just not as great as a bloodsucker, am I?”

I jumped to my feet and glared back. “No, you’re not!” I shouted. “It’s not what you are, stupid, it’s what you do!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He roared, his entire frame quivering with rage.

I was taken entirely by surprise when Edward’s voice cautioned me. “Be very careful, Bella,” his velvet voice warned. “Don’t push him too far. You need to calm him down.”

Even the voice in my head was making no sense today.

I listened to him, though. I would do anything for that voice.

“Jacob,” I pleaded, making my tone soft and even. “Is it really necessary to kill people, Jacob? Isn’t there some other way? I mean, if vampires can find a way to survive without murdering people, couldn’t you give it a try, too?”

He straightened up with a jerk, like my words had sent an electric shock through him. His eyebrows shot up and his eyes stared wide.

“Killing people?” he demanded.

“What did you think we were talking about?”

He wasn’t trembling anymore. He looked at me with half-hopeful disbelief. “I thought we were talking about your disgust for werewolves.”

“No, Jake, no. It’s not that you’re a…wolf. That’s fine,” I promised him, and I knew as I said the words that I meant them. I really didn’t care if he turned into a big

wolf—he was still Jacob. "If you could just find a way not to hurt people…that's all that upsets me. These are innocent people, Jake, people like Charlie, and I can't just look the other way while you—"

"Is that all? Really?" he interrupted me, a smile breaking across his face. "You're just scared because I'm a murderer? That's the only reason?"

"Isn't that reason enough?"

He started to laugh.

"Jacob Black, this is so not funny!"

"Sure, sure," he agreed, still chortling.

He took one long stride and caught me in another vice-tight bear hug.

"You really, honestly don't mind that I morph into a giant dog?" he asked, his voice joyful in my ear.

"No," I gasped. "Can't—breathe—Jake!"

He let me go, but took both my hands. "I'm not a killer, Bella."

I studied his face, and it was clear that this was the truth. Relief pulsed through me.

"Really?" I asked.

"Really," he promised solemnly.

I threw my arms around him. It reminded me of that first day with the motorcycles—he was bigger, though, and I felt even more like a child now.

Like that other time, he stroked my hair.

“Sorry I called you a hypocrite,” he apologized.

“Sorry I called you a murderer.”

He laughed.

I thought of something then, and pulled away from him so that I could see his face. My eyebrows furrowed in anxiety. “What about Sam? And the others?”

He shook his head, smiling like a huge burden had been removed from his shoulders. “Of course not. Don’t you remember what we call ourselves?”

The memory was clear—I’d just been thinking of that very day. “Protectors?”

“Exactly.”

“But I don’t understand. What’s happening in the woods? The missing hikers, the blood?”

His face was serious, worried at once. “We’re trying to do our job, Bella. We’re trying to protect them, but we’re always just a little too late.”

“Protect them from what? Is there really a bear out there, too?”

“Bella, honey, we only protect people from one thing—our one enemy. It’s the reason we exist—because they do.”

I stared at him blankly for one second before I understood. Then the blood drained from my face and a thin, wordless cry of horror broke through my lips.

He nodded. “I thought you, of all people, would realize what was really going on.”

“Laurent,” I whispered. “He’s still here.”

Jacob blinked twice, and cocked his head to one side. “Who’s Laurent?”

I tried to sort out the chaos in my head so that I could answer. “You know—you saw him in the meadow. You were there....” The words came out in a wondering tone as it all sunk in. “You were there, and you kept him from killing me....”

“Oh, the black-haired leech?” He grinned, a tight, fierce grin. “Was that his name?”

I shuddered. “What were you thinking?” I whispered. “He could have killed you! Jake, you don’t realize how dangerous—”

Another laugh interrupted me. “Bella, one lone vampire isn’t much of a problem for a pack as big as ours. It was so easy, it was hardly even fun!”

“What was so easy?”

“Killing the bloodsucker who was going to kill you. Now, I don’t count that towards the whole murder thing,” he added quickly. “Vampires don’t count as people.”

I could only mouth the words.
“You…killed…Laurent?”

He nodded. “Well, it was a group effort,” he qualified.

“Laurent is dead?” I whispered.

His expression changed. "You're not upset about that, are you? He was going to kill you—he was going for the kill, Bella, we were sure of that before we attacked. You know that, right?"

"I know that. No, I'm not upset—I'm . . ." I had to sit down. I stumbled back a step until I felt the driftwood against my calves, and then sank down onto it. "Laurent is dead. He's not coming back for me."

"You're not mad? He wasn't one of your friends or anything, was he?"

"My friend?" I stared up at him, confused and dizzy with relief. I started babbling, my eyes getting moist. "No, Jake. I'm so…so relieved. I thought he was going to find me—I've been waiting for him every night, just hoping that he'd stop with me and leave Charlie alone. I've been so frightened, Jacob.…But how? He was a vampire! How did you kill him? He was so strong, so hard, like marble.…"

He sat down next to me and put one big arm around me comfortingly. "It's what we're made for, Bells. We're strong, too. I wish you would have told me that you were so afraid. You didn't need to be."

"You weren't around," I mumbled, lost in thought.

"Oh, right."

"Wait, Jake—I thought you knew, though. Last night, you said it wasn't safe for you to be in my room. I thought you knew that a vampire might be coming. Isn't that what you were talking about?"

He looked confused for a minute, and then he ducked his head. "No, that's not what I meant."

"Then why didn't you think it was safe for you there?"

He looked at me with guilt-ridden eyes. "I didn't say it wasn't safe for me. I was thinking of you."

"What do you mean?"

He looked down and kicked a rock. "There's more than one reason I'm not supposed to be around you, Bella. I wasn't supposed to tell you our secret, for one thing, but the other part is that it's not safe for you. If I get too mad…too upset…you might get hurt."

I thought about that carefully. "When you were mad before…when I was yelling at you…and you were shaking…?"

"Yeah." His face dropped even lower. "That was pretty stupid of me. I have to keep a better hold on myself. I swore I wasn't going to get mad, no matter what you said to me. But…I just got so upset that I was going to lose you…that you couldn't deal with what I am…."

"What would happen…if you got too mad?" I whispered.

"I'd turn into a wolf," he whispered back.

"You don't need a full moon?"

He rolled his eyes. "Hollywood's version doesn't get much right." Then he sighed, and was serious again. "You don't need to be so stressed out, Bells. We're going to take care of this. And we're keeping a special eye on Charlie and the others—we won't let anything happen to him. Trust me on that."

Something very, very obvious, something I should have grasped at once—but I'd been so distracted by

the idea of Jacob and his friends fighting with Laurent, that I'd completely missed it at the time—occurred to me only then, when Jacob used the present tense again.

We're going to take care of this.

It wasn't over.

"Laurent is dead," I gasped, and my entire body went ice cold.

"Bella?" Jacob asked anxiously, touching my ashen cheek.

"If Laurent died…a week ago…then someone else is killing people now."

Jacob nodded; his teeth clenched together, and he spoke through them. "There were two of them. We thought his mate would want to fight us—in our stories, they usually get pretty pissed off if you kill their mate—but she just keeps running away, and then coming back again. If we could figure out what she was after, it would be easier to take her down. But she makes no sense. She keeps dancing around the edges, like she's testing our defenses, looking for a way in—but in where? Where does she want to go? Sam thinks she's trying to separate us, so she'll have a better chance…."

His voice faded until it sounded like it was coming through a long tunnel; I couldn't make out the individual words anymore. My forehead dewed with sweat and my stomach rolled like I had the stomach flu again. Exactly like I had the flu.

I turned away from him quickly, and leaned over the tree trunk. My body convulsed with useless heaves,

my empty stomach contracting with horrified nausea, though there was nothing in it to expel.

Victoria was here. Looking for me. Killing strangers in the woods. The woods where Charlie was searching….

My head spun sickeningly.

Jacob's hands caught my shoulders—kept me from sliding forward onto the rocks. I could feel his hot breath on my cheek. "Bella! What's wrong?"

"Victoria," I gasped as soon as I could catch my breath around the nauseous spasms.

In my head, Edward snarled in fury at the name.

I felt Jacob pull me up from my slump. He draped me awkwardly across his lap, laying my limp head against his shoulder. He struggled to balance me, to keep me from sagging over, one way or the other. He brushed the sweaty hair back from my face.

"Who?" Jacob asked. "Can you hear me, Bella? Bella?"

"She wasn't Laurent's mate," I moaned into his shoulder. "They were just old friends…."

"Do you need some water? A doctor? Tell me what to do," he demanded, frantic.

"I'm not sick—I'm scared," I explained in a whisper. The word scared didn't really seem to cover it.

Jacob patted my back. "Scared of this Victoria?"

I nodded, shuddering.

"Victoria is the red-haired female?"

I trembled again, and whimpered, "Yes."

"How do you know she wasn't his mate?"

"Laurent told me James was her mate," I explained, automatically flexing the hand with the scar.

He pulled my face around, holding it steady in his big hand. He stared intently into my eyes. "Did he tell you anything else, Bella? This is important. Do you know what she wants?"

"Of course," I whispered. "She wants me."

His eyes flipped wide, then narrowed into slits. "Why?" he demanded.

"Edward killed James," I whispered. Jacob held me so tightly that there was no need for me to clutch at the hole—he kept me in one piece. "She did get…pissed off. But Laurent said she thought it was fairer to kill me than Edward. Mate for mate. She didn't know—still doesn't know, I guess—that…that . . ." I swallowed hard. "That things aren't like that with us anymore. Not for Edward, anyway."

Jacob was distracted by that, his face torn between several different expressions. "Is that what happened? Why the Cullens left?"

"I'm nothing but a human, after all. Nothing special," I explained, shrugging weakly.

Something like a growl—not a real growl, just a human approximation—rumbled in Jacob's chest under my ear. "If that idiot bloodsucker is honestly stupid enough—"

"Please," I moaned. "Please. Don't."

Jacob hesitated, then nodded once.

"This is important," he said again, his face all business now. "This is exactly what we needed to know. We've got to tell the others right away."

He stood, pulling me to my feet. He kept two hands on my waist until he was sure I wasn't going to fall.

"I'm okay," I lied.

He traded his hold on my waist for one of my hands. "Let's go."

He pulled me back toward the truck.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"I'm not sure yet," he admitted. "I'll call a meeting. Hey, wait here for just a minute, okay?" He leaned me against the side of the truck and released my hand.

"Where are you going?"

"I'll be right back," he promised. Then he turned and sprinted through the parking lot, across the road, and into the bordering forest. He flitted into the trees, swift and sleek as a deer.

"Jacob!" I yelled after him hoarsely, but he was already gone.

It was not a good time to be left alone. Seconds after Jacob was out of sight, I was hyperventilating. I dragged myself into the cab of the truck, and mashed the locks down at once. It didn't make me feel any better.

Victoria was already hunting me. It was just luck that she hadn't found me yet—just luck and five teenage werewolves. I exhaled sharply. No matter what Jacob said, the thought of him coming anywhere close to Victoria was horrifying. I didn't care what he could turn into when he got mad. I could see her in my head, her face wild, her hair like flames, deadly, indestructible….

But, according to Jacob, Laurent was gone. Was that really possible? Edward—I clutched automatically at my chest—had told me how difficult it was to kill a vampire. Only another vampire could do the job. Yet Jake said this was what werewolves were made for…

He said they were keeping a special eye on Charlie—that I should trust the werewolves to keep my father safe. How could I trust that? None of us were safe! Jacob the very least of all, if he was trying to put himself between Victoria and Charlie…between Victoria and me.

I felt like I might be about to throw up again.

A sharp rap on the truck's window made me yelp in terror—but it was just Jacob, back already. I unlocked the door with trembling, grateful fingers.

"You're really scared, aren't you?" he asked as he climbed in.

I nodded.

"Don't be. We'll take care of you—and Charlie, too. I promise."

"The idea of you finding Victoria is scarier than the idea of her finding me," I whispered.

He laughed. “You’ve got to have a little more confidence in us than that. It’s insulting.”

I just shook my head. I’d seen too many vampires in action.

“Where did you go just now?” I asked.

He pursed his lips, and said nothing.

“What? Is it a secret?”

He frowned. “Not really. It’s kind of weird, though. I don’t want to freak you out.”

“I’m sort of used to weird by this point, you know.” I tried to smile without much success.

Jacob grinned back easily. “Guess you’d have to be. Okay. See, when we’re wolves, we can…hear each other.”

My eyebrows pulled down in confusion.

“Not hear sounds,” he went on, “but we can hear…thoughts—each other’s anyway—no matter how far away from each other we are. It really helps when we hunt, but it’s a big pain otherwise. It’s embarrassing—having no secrets like that. Freaky, eh?”

“Is that what you meant last night, when you said you would tell them you’d seen me, even though you didn’t want to?”

“You’re quick.”

“Thanks.”

"You're also very good with weird. I thought that would bother you."

"It's not…well, you're not the first person I've known who could do that. So it doesn't seem so weird to me."

"Really?…Wait—are you talking about your bloodsuckers?"

"I wish you wouldn't call them that."

He laughed. "Whatever. The Cullens, then?"

"Just…just Edward." I pulled one arm surreptitiously around my torso.

Jacob looked surprised—unpleasantly so. "I thought those were just stories. I've heard legends about vampires who could do…extra stuff, but I thought that was just a myth."

"Is anything just a myth anymore?" I asked him wryly.

He scowled. "Guess not. Okay, we're going to meet Sam and the others at the place we go to ride our bikes."

I started the truck and headed back up the road.

"So did you just turn into a wolf now, to talk to Sam?" I asked, curious.

Jacob nodded, seeming embarrassed. "I kept it real short—I tried not to think about you so they wouldn't know what was going on. I was afraid Sam would tell me I couldn't bring you."

"That wouldn't have stopped me." I couldn't get rid of my perception of Sam as the bad guy. My teeth clenched together whenever I heard his name.

"Well, it would have stopped me," Jacob said, morose now. "Remember how I couldn't finish my sentences last night? How I couldn't just tell you the whole story?"

"Yeah. You looked like you were choking on something."

He chuckled darkly. "Close enough. Sam told me I couldn't tell you. He's…the head of the pack, you know. He's the Alpha. When he tells us to do something, or not to do something—when he really means it, well, we can't just ignore him."

"Weird," I muttered.

"Very," he agreed. "It's kind of a wolf thing."

"Huh" was the best response I could think of.

"Yeah, there's a load of stuff like that—wolf things. I'm still learning. I can't imagine what it was like for Sam, trying to deal with this alone. It sucks bad enough to go through it with a whole pack for support."

"Sam was alone?"

"Yeah." Jacob's voice lowered. "When I…changed, it was the most…horrible, the most terrifying thing I've ever been through—worse than anything I could have imagined. But I wasn't alone—there were the voices there, in my head, telling me what had happened and what I had to do. That kept me from losing my mind, I

think. But Sam . . .” He shook his head. “Sam had no help.”

This was going to take some adjusting. When Jacob explained it like that, it was hard not to feel compassion for Sam. I had to keep reminding myself that there was no reason to hate him anymore.

“Will they be angry that I’m with you?” I asked.

He made a face. “Probably.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t—”

“No, it’s okay,” he assured me. “You know a ton of things that can help us. It’s not like you’re just some ignorant human. You’re like a…I don’t know, spy or something. You’ve been behind enemy lines.”

I frowned to myself. Was that what Jacob would want from me? Insider information to help them destroy their enemies? I wasn’t a spy, though. I hadn’t been collecting that kind of information. Already, his words made me feel like a traitor.

But I wanted him to stop Victoria, didn’t I?

No.

I did want Victoria to be stopped, preferably before she tortured me to death or ran into Charlie or killed another stranger. I just didn’t want Jacob to be the one to stop her, or rather to try. I didn’t want Jacob within a hundred miles of her.

“Like the stuff about the mind-reading bloodsucker,” he continued, oblivious to my reverie. “That’s the kind of thing we need to know about. That really sucks that those stories are true. It makes everything more

complicated. Hey, do you think this Victoria can do anything special?"

"I don't think so," I hesitated, and then sighed. "He would have mentioned it."

"He? Oh, you mean Edward—oops, sorry. I forgot. You don't like to say his name. Or hear it."

I squeezed my midsection, trying to ignore the throbbing around the edges of my chest. "Not really, no."

"Sorry."

"How do you know me so well, Jacob? Sometimes it's like you can read my mind."

"Naw. I just pay attention."

We were on the little dirt road where Jacob had first taught me to ride the motorcycle.

"This good?" I asked.

"Sure, sure."

I pulled over and cut the engine.

"You're still pretty unhappy, aren't you?" he murmured.

I nodded, staring unseeingly into the gloomy forest.

"Did you ever think…that maybe…you're better off?"

I inhaled slowly, and then let my breath out. "No."

"'Cause he wasn't the best—"

"Please, Jacob," I interrupted, begging in a whisper. "Could we please not talk about this? I can't stand it."

"Okay." He took a deep breath. "I'm sorry I said anything."

"Don't feel bad. If things were different, it would be nice to finally be able to talk to someone about it."

He nodded. "Yeah, I had a hard time keeping a secret from you for two weeks. It must be hell to not be able to talk to anyone."

"Hell," I agreed.

Jacob sucked in a sharp breath. "They're here. Let's go."

"Are you sure?" I asked while he popped his door open. "Maybe I shouldn't be here."

"They'll deal with it," he said, and then he grinned. "Who's afraid of the big, bad wolf?"

"Ha ha," I said. But I got out of the truck, hurrying around the front end to stand close beside Jacob. I remembered only too clearly the giant monsters in the meadow. My hands were trembling like Jacob's had been before, but with fear rather than rage.

Jake took my hand and squeezed it. "Here we go."

# Chapter 14

## FAMILY

I cowered into Jacob's side, my eyes scanning the forest for the other werewolves. When they appeared, striding out from between the trees, they weren't what I was expecting. I'd gotten the image of the wolves stuck in my head. These were just four really big half-naked boys.

Again, they reminded me of brothers, quadruplets. Something about the way they moved almost in synchronization to stand across the road from us, the way they all had the same long, round muscles under the same red-brown skin, the same cropped black hair, and the way their expressions altered at exactly the same moment.

They started out curious and cautious. When they saw me there, half-hidden beside Jacob, they all became furious in the same second.

Sam was still the biggest, though Jacob was getting close to catching up with him. Sam didn't really count as a boy. His face was older—not in the sense of lines or signs of aging, but in the maturity, the patience of his expression.

"What have you done, Jacob?" he demanded.

One of the others, one I didn't recognize—Jared or Paul—thrust past Sam and spoke before Jacob could defend himself.

"Why can't you just follow the rules, Jacob?" he yelled, throwing his arms in the air. "What the hell are you thinking? Is she more important than

everything—than the whole tribe? Than the people getting killed?”

“She can help,” Jacob said quietly.

“Help!” the angry boy shouted. His arms begin to quiver. “Oh, that’s likely! I’m sure the leech-lover is just dying to help us out!”

“Don’t talk about her like that!” Jacob shouted back, stung by the boy’s criticism.

A shudder rippled through the other boy, along his shoulders and down his spine.

“Paul! Relax!” Sam commanded.

Paul shook his head back and forth, not in defiance, but as though he were trying to concentrate.

“Jeez, Paul,” one of the other boys—probably Jared—muttered. “Get a grip.”

Paul twisted his head toward Jared, his lips curling back in irritation. Then he shifted his glare in my direction. Jacob took a step to put himself in front of me.

That did it.

“Right, protect her!” Paul roared in outrage. Another shudder, a convulsion, heaved through his body. He threw his head back, a real growl tearing from between his teeth.

“Paul!” Sam and Jacob shouted together.

Paul seemed to fall forward, vibrating violently. Halfway to the ground, there was a loud ripping noise, and the boy exploded.

Dark silver fur blew out from the boy, coalescing into a shape more than five-times his size—a massive, crouched shape, ready to spring.

The wolf's muzzle wrinkled back over his teeth, and another growl rolled through his colossal chest. His dark, enraged eyes focused on me.

In the same second, Jacob was running across the road straight for the monster.

"Jacob!" I screamed.

Mid-stride, a long tremor shivered down Jacob's spine. He leaped forward, diving headfirst into the empty air.

With another sharp tearing sound, Jacob exploded, too. He burst out of his skin—shreds of black and white cloth blasted up into the air. It happened so quickly that if I'd blinked, I'd have missed the entire transformation. One second it was Jacob diving into the air, and then it was the gigantic, russet brown wolf—so enormous that I couldn't make sense of its mass somehow fitting inside Jacob—charging the crouched silver beast.

Jacob met the other werewolf's attack head-on. Their angry snarls echoed like thunder off the trees.

The black and white scraps—the remains of Jacob's clothes—fluttered to the ground where he'd disappeared.

"Jacob!" I screamed again, staggering forward.

"Stay where you are, Bella," Sam ordered. It was hard to hear him over the roar of the fighting wolves. They were snapping and tearing at each other, their sharp teeth flashing toward each other's throats. The Jacob-wolf seemed to have the upper hand—he was visibly bigger than the other wolf, and it looked like he was stronger, too. He rammed his shoulder against the gray wolf again and again, knocking him back toward the trees.

"Take her to Emily's," Sam shouted toward the other boys, who were watching the conflict with rapt expressions. Jacob had successfully shoved the gray wolf off the road, and they were disappearing into the forest, though the sound of their snarls was still loud. Sam ran after them, kicking off his shoes on the way. As he darted into the trees, he was quivering from head to toe.

The growling and snapping was fading into the distance. Suddenly, the sound cut off and it was very quiet on the road.

One of the boys started laughing.

I turned to stare at him—my wide eyes felt frozen, like I couldn't even blink them.

The boy seemed to be laughing at my expression. "Well, there's something you don't see every day," he snickered. His face was vaguely familiar—thinner than the others....Embry Call.

"I do," the other boy, Jared, grumbled. "Every single day."

"Aw, Paul doesn't lose his temper every day," Embry disagreed, still grinning. "Maybe two out of three."

Jared stopped to pick something white up off the ground. He held it up toward Embry; it dangled in limp strips from his hand.

“Totally shredded,” Jared said. “Billy said this was the last pair he could afford—guess Jacob’s going barefoot now.”

“This one survived,” Embry said, holding up a white sneaker. “Jake can hop,” he added with a laugh.

Jared started collecting various pieces of fabric from the dirt. “Get Sam’s shoes, will you? All the rest of this is headed for the trash.”

Embry grabbed the shoes and then jogged into the trees where Sam had disappeared. He was back in a few seconds with a pair of cut-off jeans draped over his arm. Jared gathered the torn remnants of Jacob’s and Paul’s clothes and wadded them into a ball. Suddenly, he seemed to remember me.

He looked at me carefully, assessing.

“Hey, you’re not going to faint or puke or anything?” he demanded.

“I don’t think so,” I gasped.

“You don’t look so good. Maybe you should sit down.”

“Okay,” I mumbled. For the second time in one morning, I put my head between my knees.

“Jake should have warned us,” Embry complained.

“He shouldn’t have brought his girlfriend into this. What did he expect?”

"Well, the wolf's out of the bag now." Embry sighed. "Way to go, Jake."

I raised my head to glare at the two boys who seemed to be taking this all so lightly. "Aren't you worried about them at all?" I demanded.

Embry blinked once in surprise. "Worried? Why?"

"They could hurt each other!"

Embry and Jared guffawed.

"I hope Paul gets a mouthful of him," Jared said. "Teach him a lesson."

I blanched.

"Yeah, right!" Embry disagreed. "Did you see Jake? Even Sam couldn't have phased on the fly like that. He saw Paul losing it, and it took him, what, half a second to attack? The boy's got a gift."

"Paul's been fighting longer. I'll bet you ten bucks he leaves a mark."

"You're on. Jake's a natural. Paul doesn't have a prayer."

They shook hands, grinning.

I tried to comfort myself with their lack of concern, but I couldn't drive the brutal image of the fighting werewolves from my head. My stomach churned, sore and empty, my head ached with worry.

"Let's go see Emily. You know she'll have food waiting." Embry looked down at me. "Mind giving us a ride?"

“No problem,” I choked.

Jared raised one eyebrow. “Maybe you’d better drive, Embry. She still looks like she might hurl.”

“Good idea. Where are the keys?” Embry asked me.

“Ignition.”

Embry opened the passenger-side door. “In you go,” he said cheerfully, hauling me up from the ground with one hand and stuffing me into my seat. He appraised the available space. “You’ll have to ride in the back,” he told Jared.

“That’s fine. I got a weak stomach. I don’t want to be in there when she blows.”

“I bet she’s tougher than that. She runs with vampires.”

“Five bucks?” Jared asked.

“Done. I feel guilty, taking your money like this.”

Embry got in and started the engine while Jared leapt agilely into the bed. As soon as his door was closed, Embry muttered to me, “Don’t throw up, okay? I’ve only got a ten, and if Paul got his teeth into Jacob . . .”

“Okay,” I whispered.

Embry drove us back toward the village.

“Hey, how did Jake get around the injunction anyway?”

“The…what?”

“Er, the order. You know, to not spill the beans. How did he tell you about this?”

“Oh, that,” I said, remembering Jacob trying to choke out the truth to me last night. “He didn’t. I guessed right.”

Embry pursed his lips, looking surprised. “Hmm. S’pose that would work.”

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Emily’s house. She’s Sam’s girlfriend…no, fiancee, now, I guess. They’ll meet us back there after Sam gives it to them for what just happened. And after Paul and Jake scrounge up some new clothes, if Paul even has any left.”

“Does Emily know about…?”

“Yeah. And hey, don’t stare at her. That bugs Sam.”

I frowned at him. “Why would I stare?”

Embry looked uncomfortable. “Like you saw just now, hanging out around werewolves has its risks.” He changed the subject quickly. “Hey, are you okay about the whole thing with the black-haired bloodsucker in the meadow? It didn’t look like he was a friend of yours, but . . .” Embry shrugged.

“No, he wasn’t my friend.”

“That’s good. We didn’t want to start anything, break the treaty, you know.”

“Oh, yeah, Jake told me about the treaty once, a long time ago. Why would killing Laurent break the treaty?”

"Laurent," he repeated, snorting, like he was amused the vampire had had a name. "Well, we were technically on Cullen turf. We're not allowed to attack any of them, the Cullens, at least, off our land—unless they break the treaty first. We didn't know if the black-haired one was a relative of theirs or something. Looked like you knew him."

"How would they go about breaking the treaty?"

"If they bite a human. Jake wasn't so keen on the idea of letting it go that far."

"Oh. Um, thanks. I'm glad you didn't wait."

"Our pleasure." He sounded like he meant that in a literal sense.

Embry drove past the easternmost house on the highway before turning off onto a narrow dirt road. "Your truck is slow," he noted.

"Sorry."

At the end of the lane was a tiny house that had once been gray. There was only one narrow window beside the weathered blue door, but the window box under it was filled with bright orange and yellow marigolds, giving the whole place a cheerful look.

Embry opened the truck door and inhaled. "Mmm, Emily's cooking."

Jared jumped out of the back of the truck and headed for the door, but Embry stopped him with one hand on his chest. He looked at me meaningfully, and cleared his throat.

"I don't have my wallet on me," Jared said.

"That's okay. I won't forget."

They climbed up the one step and entered the house without knocking. I followed timidly after them.

The front room, like Billy's house, was mostly kitchen. A young woman with satiny copper skin and long, straight, crow-black hair was standing at the counter by the sink, popping big muffins out of a tin and placing them on a paper plate. For one second, I thought the reason Embry had told me not to stare was because the girl was so beautiful.

And then she asked "You guys hungry?" in a melodic voice, and she turned to face us full on, a smile on half of her face.

The right side of her face was scarred from hairline to chin by three thick, red lines, livid in color though they were long healed. One line pulled down the corner of her dark, almond-shaped right eye, another twisted the right side of her mouth into a permanent grimace.

Thankful for Embry's warning, I quickly turned my eyes to the muffins in her hands. They smelled wonderful—like fresh blueberries.

"Oh," Emily said, surprised. "Who's this?"

I looked up, trying to focus on the left half of her face.

"Bella Swan," Jared told her, shrugging. Apparently, I'd been a topic of conversation before. "Who else?"

"Leave it to Jacob to find a way around," Emily murmured. She stared at me, and neither half of her once-beautiful face was friendly. "So, you're the vampire girl."

I stiffened. "Yes. Are you the wolf girl?"

She laughed, as did Embry and Jared. The left half of her face warmed. "I guess I am." She turned to Jared. "Where's Sam?"

"Bella, er, surprised Paul this morning."

Emily rolled her good eye. "Ah, Paul," she sighed. "Do you think they'll be long? I was just about to start the eggs."

"Don't worry," Embry told her. "If they're late, we won't let anything go to waste."

Emily chuckled, and then opened the refrigerator. "No doubt," she agreed. "Bella, are you hungry? Go ahead and help yourself to a muffin."

"Thanks." I took one from the plate and started nibbling around the edges. It was delicious, and it felt good in my tender stomach. Embry picked up his third and shoved it into his mouth whole.

"Save some for your brothers," Emily chastised him, hitting him on the head with a wooden spoon. The word surprised me, but the others thought nothing of it.

"Pig," Jared commented.

I leaned against the counter and watched the three of them banter like a family. Emily's kitchen was a friendly place, bright with white cupboards and pale wooden floorboards. On the little round table, a cracked blue-and-white china pitcher was overflowing with wildflowers. Embry and Jared seemed entirely at ease here.

Emily was mixing a humongous batch of eggs, several dozen, in a big yellow bowl. She had the sleeves of her lavender shirt pushed up, and I could see that the scars extended all the way down her arm to the back of her right hand. Hanging out with werewolves truly did have its risks, just as Embry had said.

The front door opened, and Sam stepped through.

“Emily,” he said, and so much love saturated his voice that I felt embarrassed, intrusive, as I watched him cross the room in one stride and take her face in his wide hands. He leaned down and kissed the dark scars on her right cheek before he kissed her lips.

“Hey, none of that,” Jared complained. “I’m eating.”

“Then shut up and eat,” Sam suggested, kissing Emily’s ruined mouth again.

“Ugh,” Embry groaned.

This was worse than any romantic movie; this was so real that it sang out loud with joy and life and true love. I put my muffin down and folded my arms across my empty chest. I stared at the flowers, trying to ignore the utter peace of their moment, and the wretched throbbing of my wounds.

I was grateful for the distraction when Jacob and Paul came through the door, and then shocked when I saw that they were laughing. While I watched, Paul punched Jacob on the shoulder and Jacob went for a kidney jab in return. They laughed again. They both appeared to be in one piece.

Jacob scanned the room, his eyes stopping when he found me leaning, awkward and out of place, against the counter in the far corner of the kitchen.

“Hey, Bells,” he greeted me cheerfully. He grabbed two muffins as he passed the table and came to stand beside me. “Sorry about before,” he muttered under his breath. “How are you holding up?”

“Don’t worry, I’m okay. Good muffins.” I picked mine back up and started nibbling again. My chest felt better as soon as Jacob was beside me.

“Oh, man!” Jared wailed, interrupting us.

I looked up, and he and Embry were examining a fading pink line on Paul’s forearm. Embry was grinning, exultant.

“Fifteen dollars,” he crowed.

“Did you do that?” I whispered to Jacob, remembering the bet.

“I barely touched him. He’ll be perfect by sundown.”

“By sundown?” I looked at the line on Paul’s arm. Odd, but it looked weeks old.

“Wolf thing,” Jacob whispered.

I nodded, trying to not look weirded out.

“You okay?” I asked him under my breath.

“Not a scratch on me.” His expression was smug.

“Hey, guys,” Sam said in a loud voice, interrupting all the conversations going on in the small room. Emily was at the stove, scraping the egg mixture around a big skillet, but Sam still had one hand touching the small of her back, an unconscious gesture. “Jacob has information for us.”

Paul looked unsurprised. Jacob must have explained this to him and Sam already. Or…they'd just heard his thoughts.

"I know what the redhead wants." Jacob directed his words toward Jared and Embry. "That's what I was trying to tell you before." He kicked the leg of the chair Paul had settled into.

"And?" Jared asked.

Jacob's face got serious. "She is trying to avenge her mate—only it wasn't the black-haired leech we killed. The Cullens got her mate last year, and she's after Bella now."

This wasn't news to me, but I still shivered.

Jared, Embry, and Emily stared at me with open-mouthed surprise.

"She's just a girl," Embry protested.

"I didn't say it made sense. But that's why the bloodsucker's been trying to get past us. She's been heading for Forks."

They continued to stare at me, mouths still hanging open, for a long moment. I ducked my head.

"Excellent," Jared finally said, a smile beginning to pull up the corners of his mouth. "We've got bait."

With stunning speed, Jacob yanked a can opener from the counter and launched it at Jared's head. Jared's hand flicked up faster than I would have thought possible, and he snagged the tool just before it hit his face.

"Bella is not bait."

"You know what I mean," Jared said, unabashed.

"So we'll be changing our patterns," Sam said, ignoring their squabble. "We'll try leaving a few holes, and see if she falls for it. We'll have to split up, and I don't like that. But if she's really after Bella, she probably won't try to take advantage of our divided numbers."

"Quil's got to be close to joining us," Embry murmured. "Then we'll be able to split evenly."

Everyone looked down. I glanced at Jacob's face, and it was hopeless, like it had been yesterday afternoon, outside his house. No matter how comfortable they seemed to be with their fate, here in this happy kitchen, none of these werewolves wanted the same fate for their friend.

"Well, we won't count on that," Sam said in a low voice, and then continued at his regular volume. "Paul, Jared, and Embry will take the outer perimeter, and Jacob and I will take the inner. We'll collapse in when we've got her trapped."

I noticed that Emily didn't particularly like that Sam would be in the smaller grouping. Her worry had me glancing up at Jacob, worrying, too.

Sam caught my eye. "Jacob thinks it would be best if you spent as much time as possible here in La Push. She won't know where to find you so easily, just in case."

"What about Charlie?" I demanded.

"March Madness is still going," Jacob said. "I think Billy and Harry can manage to keep Charlie down here when he's not at work."

"Wait," Sam said, holding one hand up. His glance flickered to Emily and then back to me. "That's what Jacob thinks is best, but you need to decide for yourself. You should weigh the risks of both options very seriously. You saw this morning how easily things can get dangerous here, how quickly they get out of hand. If you choose to stay with us, I can't make any guarantees about your safety."

"I won't hurt her," Jacob mumbled, looking down.

Sam acted as if he hadn't heard him speak. "If there was somewhere else you felt safe . . ."

I bit my lip. Where could I go that wouldn't put someone else in danger? I recoiled again from the idea of bringing Reneé into this—pulling her into the circle of the target I wore...."I don't want to lead Victoria anywhere else," I whispered.

Sam nodded. "That's true. It's better to have her here, where we can end this."

I flinched. I didn't want Jacob or any of the rest of them trying to end Victoria. I glanced at Jake's face; it was relaxed, almost the same as I remembered it from before the onset of the wolf thing, and utterly unconcerned by the idea of hunting vampires.

"You'll be careful, right?" I asked, an audible lump in my throat.

The boys burst into loud hoots of amusement. Everyone laughed at me—except Emily. She met my eyes, and I could suddenly see the symmetry

underlying her deformity. Her face was still beautiful, and alive with a concern even more fierce than mine. I had to look away, before the love behind that concern could start me aching again.

“Food’s ready,” she announced then, and the strategic conversation was history. The guys hurried to surround the table—which looked tiny and in danger of being crushed by them—and devoured the buffet-sized pan of eggs Emily placed in their midst in record time. Emily ate leaning against the counter like me—avoiding the bedlam at the table—and watched them with affectionate eyes. Her expression clearly stated that this was her family.

All in all, it wasn’t exactly what I’d been expecting from a pack of werewolves.

I spent the day in La Push, the majority of it in Billy’s house. He left a message on Charlie’s phone and at the station, and Charlie showed up around dinnertime with two pizzas. It was good he brought two larges; Jacob ate one all by himself.

I saw Charlie eyeing the two of us suspiciously all night, especially the much-changed Jacob. He asked about the hair; Jacob shrugged and told him it was just more convenient.

I knew that as soon as Charlie and I were headed home, Jacob would take off—off to run around as a wolf, as he had done intermittently through the entire day. He and his brothers of sorts kept up a constant watch, looking for some sign of Victoria’s return. But since they’d chased her away from the hot springs last night—chased her halfway to Canada, according to Jacob—she’d yet to make another foray.

I had no hope at all that she might just give up. I didn't have that kind of luck.

Jacob walked me to my truck after dinner and lingered by the window, waiting for Charlie to drive away first.

"Don't be afraid tonight," Jacob said, while Charlie pretended to be having trouble with his seat belt. "We'll be out there, watching."

"I won't worry about myself," I promised.

"You're silly. Hunting vampires is fun. It's the best part of this whole mess."

I shook my head. "If I'm silly, then you're dangerously unbalanced."

He chuckled. "Get some rest, Bella, honey. You look exhausted."

"I'll try."

Charlie honked his horn impatiently.

"See you tomorrow," Jacob said. "Come down first thing."

"I will."

Charlie followed me home. I paid scant attention to the lights in my rearview mirror. Instead, I wondered where Sam and Jared and Embry and Paul were, out running in the night. I wondered if Jacob had joined them yet.

When we got home, I hurried for the stairs, but Charlie was right behind me.

"What's going on, Bella?" he demanded before I could escape. "I thought Jacob was part of a gang and you two were fighting."

"We made up."

"And the gang?"

"I don't know—who can understand teenage boys? They're a mystery. But I met Sam Uley and his fiancée, Emily. The seemed pretty nice to me." I shrugged. "Must have all been a misunderstanding."

His face changed. "I hadn't heard that he and Emily had made it official. That's nice. Poor girl."

"Do you know what happened to her?"

"Mauled by a bear, up north, during salmon spawning season—horrible accident. It was more than a year ago now. I heard Sam was really messed up over it."

"That's horrible," I echoed. More than a year ago. I'd bet that meant it had happened when there was just one werewolf in La Push. I shuddered at the thought of how Sam must have felt every time he looked at Emily's face.

That night, I lay awake for a long time trying to sort through the day. I worked my way backward through dinner with Billy, Jacob, and Charlie, to the long afternoon in the Blacks' house, waiting anxiously to hear something from Jacob, to Emily's kitchen, to the horror of the werewolf fight, to talking with Jacob on the beach.

I thought about what Jacob had said early this morning, about hypocrisy. I thought about that for a

long time. I didn't like to think that I was a hypocrite, only what was the point of lying to myself?

I curled into a tight ball. No, Edward wasn't a killer. Even in his darker past, he'd never been a murderer of innocents, at least.

But what if he had been? What if, during the time I that I'd known him, he'd been just like any other vampire? What if people had been disappearing from the woods, just like now? Would that have kept me away from him?

I shook my head sadly. Love is irrational, I reminded myself. The more you loved someone, the less sense anything made.

I rolled over and tried to think of something else—and I thought of Jacob and his brothers, out running in the darkness. I fell asleep imagining the wolves, invisible in the night, guarding me from danger. When I dreamed, I stood in the forest again, but I didn't wander. I was holding Emily's scarred hand as we faced into the shadows and waited anxiously for our werewolves to come home.

# Chapter 15

## PRESSURE

It was Spring Break in Forks again. When I woke up on Monday morning, I lay in bed for a few seconds absorbing that. Last spring break, I'd been hunted by a vampire, too. I hoped this wasn't some kind of tradition forming.

Already I was falling into the pattern of things in La Push. I'd spent Sunday mostly on the beach, while Charlie hung out with Billy at the Blacks' house. I was supposed to be with Jacob, but Jacob had other things to do, so I wandered alone, keeping the secret from Charlie.

When Jacob dropped in to check on me, he apologized for ditching me so much. He told me his schedule wasn't always this crazy, but until Victoria was stopped, the wolves were on red alert.

When we walked along the beach now, he always held my hand.

This made me brood over what Jared had said, about Jacob involving his "girlfriend." I supposed that that was exactly what it looked like from the outside. As long as Jake and I knew how it really was, I shouldn't let those kinds of assumptions bother me. And maybe they wouldn't, if I hadn't known that Jacob would have loved for things to be what they appeared. But his hand felt nice as it warmed mine, and I didn't protest.

I worked Tuesday afternoon—Jacob followed me on his bike to make sure I arrived safely—and Mike noticed.

"Are you dating that kid from La Push? The sophomore?" He asked, poorly disguising the resentment in his tone.

I shrugged. "Not in the technical sense of the word. I do spent most of my time with Jacob, though. He's my best friend."

Mike's eyes narrowed shrewdly. "Don't kid yourself, Bella. The guy's head over heels for you."

"I know," I sighed. "Life is complicated."

"And girls are cruel," Mike said under his breath.

I supposed that was an easy assumption to make, too.

That night, Sam and Emily joined Charlie and me for dessert at Billy's house. Emily brought a cake that would have won over a harder man than Charlie. I could see, as the conversation flowed naturally through a range of casual subjects, that any worries Charlie might have harbored about gangs in La Push were being dissolved.

Jake and I skipped out early, to get some privacy. We went out to his garage and sat in the Rabbit. Jacob leaned his head back, his face drawn with exhaustion.

"You need some sleep, Jake."

"I'll get around to it."

He reached over and took my hand. His skin was blazing on mine.

"Is that one of those wolf things?" I asked him. "The heat, I mean."

"Yeah. We run a little warmer than the normal people. About one-oh-eight, one-oh-nine. I never get cold anymore. I could stand like this"— he gestured to his bare torso—"in a snowstorm and it wouldn't bother me. The flakes would turn to rain where I stood."

"And you all heal fast—that's a wolf thing, too?"

"Yeah, wanna see? It's pretty cool." His eyes flipped open and he grinned. He reached around me to the glove compartment and dug around for a minute. His hand came out with a pocketknife.

"No, I do not want to see!" I shouted as soon as I realized what he was thinking. "Put that away!"

Jacob chuckled, but shoved the knife back where it belonged. "Fine. It's a good thing we heal, though. You can't go see just any doctor when you're running a temperature that should mean you're dead."

"No, I guess not." I thought about that for a minute. ". . . And being so big—that's part of it? Is that why you're all worried about Quil?"

"That and the fact that Quil's grandfather says the kid could fry an egg on his forehead." Jacob's face turned hopeless. "It won't be long now. There's no exact age…it just builds and builds and then suddenly—" He broke off, and it was a moment before he could speak again. "Sometimes, if you get really upset or something, that can trigger it early. But I wasn't upset about anything—I was happy." He laughed bitterly. "Because of you, mostly. That's why it didn't happen to me sooner. Instead it just kept on building up inside me—I was like a time bomb. You know what

set me off? I got back from that movie and Billy said I looked weird. That was all, but I just snapped. And then I—I exploded. I almost ripped his face off—my own father!" He shuddered, and his face paled.

"Is it really bad, Jake?" I asked anxiously, wishing I had some way to help him. "Are you miserable?"

"No, I'm not miserable," he told me. "Not anymore. Not now that you know. That was hard, before." He leaned over so that his cheek was resting on top of my head.

He was quiet for a moment, and I wondered what he was thinking about. Maybe I didn't want to know.

"What's the hardest part?" I whispered, still wishing I could help.

"The hardest part is feeling…out of control," he said slowly. "Feeling like I can't be sure of myself—like maybe you shouldn't be around me, like maybe nobody should. Like I'm a monster who might hurt somebody. You've seen Emily. Sam lost control of his temper for just one second…and she was standing too close. And now there's nothing he can ever do to put it right again. I hear his thoughts—I know what that feels like….

"Who wants to be a nightmare, a monster?

"And then, the way it comes so easily to me, the way I'm better at it than the rest of them—does that make me even less human than Embry or Sam? Sometimes I'm afraid that I'm losing myself."

"Is it hard? To find yourself again?"

"At first," he said. "It takes some practice to phase back and forth. But it's easier for me."

"Why?" I wondered.

"Because Ephraim Black was my father's grandfather, and Quil Ateara was my mother's grandfather."

"Quil?" I asked in confusion.

"His great-grandfather," Jacob clarified. "The Quil you know is my second cousin."

"But why does it matter who your great-grandfathers are?"

"Because Ephraim and Quil were in the last pack. Levi Uley was the third. It's in my blood on both sides. I never had a chance. Like Quil doesn't have a chance."

His expression was bleak.

"What's the very best part?" I asked, hoping to cheer him up.

"The best part," he said, suddenly smiling again, "is the speed."

"Better than the motorcycles?"

He nodded, enthusiastic. "There's no comparison."

"How fast can you…?"

"Run?" he finished my question. "Fast enough. What can I measure it by? We caught…what was his name? Laurent? I imagine that means more to you than it would to someone else."

It did mean something to me. I couldn't imagine that—the wolves running faster than a vampire. When the Cullens ran, they all but turned invisible with speed.

"So, tell me something I don't know," he said. "Something about vampires. How did you stand it, being around them? Didn't it creep you out?"

"No," I said curtly.

My tone made him thoughtful for a moment.

"Say, why'd your bloodsucker kill that James, anyway?" he asked suddenly.

"James was trying to kill me—it was like a game for him. He lost. Do you remember last spring when I was in the hospital down in Phoenix?"

Jacob sucked in a breath. "He got that close?"

"He got very, very close." I stroked my scar. Jacob noticed, because he held the hand I moved.

"What's that?" He traded hands, examining my right. "This is your funny scar, the cold one." He looked at it closer, with new eyes, and gasped.

"Yes, it's what you think it is," I said. "James bit me."

His eyes bulged, and his face turned a strange, sallow color under the russet surface. He looked like he was about to be sick.

"But if he bit you…? Shouldn't you be…?" He choked.

"Edward saved me twice," I whispered. "He sucked the venom out—you know, like with a rattlesnake." I

twitched as the pain lashed around the edges of the hole.

But I wasn't the only one twitching. I could feel Jacob's whole body trembling next to mine. Even the car shook.

"Careful, Jake. Easy. Calm down."

"Yeah," he panted. "Calm." He shook his head back and forth quickly. After a moment, only his hands were shaking.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, almost. Tell me something else. Give me something else to think about."

"What do you want to know?"

"I don't know." He had his eyes closed, concentrating. "The extra stuff I guess. Did any of the other Cullens have…extra talents? Like the mind reading?"

I hesitated a second. This felt like a question he would ask of his spy, not his friend. But what was the point of hiding what I knew? It didn't matter now, and it would help him control himself.

So I spoke quickly, the image of Emily's ruined face in my mind, and the hair rising on my arms. I couldn't imagine how the russet wolf would fit inside the Rabbit—Jacob would tear the whole garage apart if he changed now.

"Jasper could…sort of control the emotions of the people around him. Not in a bad way, just to calm someone down, that kind of thing. It would probably help Paul a lot," I added, teasing weakly. "And then

Alice could see things that were going to happen. The future, you know, but not absolutely. The things she saw would change when someone changed the path they were on....”

Like how she’d seen me dying...and she’d seen me becoming one of them. Two things that had not happened. And one that never would. My head started to spin—I couldn’t seem to pull in enough oxygen from the air. No lungs.

Jacob was entirely in control now, very still beside me.

“Why do you do that?” he asked. He tugged lightly at one of my arms, which was bound around my chest, and then gave up when it wouldn’t come loose easily. I hadn’t even realized I’d moved them. “You do that when you’re upset. Why?”

“It hurts to think about them,” I whispered. “It’s like I can’t breathe...like I’m breaking into pieces....” It was bizarre how much I could tell Jacob now. We had no more secrets.

He smoothed my hair. “It’s okay, Bella, it’s okay. I won’t bring it up again. I’m sorry.”

“I’m fine.” I gasped. “Happens all the time. Not your fault.”

“We’re a pretty messed-up pair, aren’t we?” Jacob said. “Neither one of us can hold our shape together right.”

“Pathetic,” I agreed, still breathless.

“At least we have each other,” he said, clearly comforted by the thought.

I was comforted, too. “At least there’s that,” I agreed.

And when we were together, it was fine. But Jacob had a horrible, dangerous job he felt compelled to do, and so I was often alone, stuck in La Push for safety, with nothing to do to keep my mind off any of my worries.

I felt awkward, always taking up space at Billy’s. I did some studying for another Calculus test that was coming up next week, but I could only look at math for so long. When I didn’t have something obvious to do in my hands, I felt like I ought to be making conversation with Billy—the pressure of normal societal rules. But Billy wasn’t one for filling up the long silences, and so the awkwardness continued.

I tried hanging out at Emily’s place Wednesday afternoon, for a change. At first it was kind of nice. Emily was a cheerful person who never sat still. I drifted behind her while she flitted around her little house and yard, scrubbing at the spotless floor, pulling a tiny weed, fixing a broken hinge, tugging a string of wool through an ancient loom, and always cooking, too. She complained lightly about the increase in the boys’ appetites from all their extra running, but it was easy to see she didn’t mind taking care of them. It wasn’t hard to be with her—after all, we were both wolf girls now.

But Sam checked in after I’d been there for a few hours. I only stayed long enough to ascertain that Jacob was fine and there was no news, and then I had to escape. The aura of love and contentment that surrounded them was harder to take in concentrated doses, with no one else around to dilute it.

So that left me wandering the beach, pacing the length of the rocky crescent back and forth, again and again.

Alone time wasn't good for me. Thanks to the new honesty with Jacob, I'd been talking and thinking about the Cullens way too much. No matter how I tried to distract myself—and I had plenty to think of: I was honestly and desperately worried about Jacob and his wolf-brothers, I was terrified for Charlie and the others who thought they were hunting animals, I was getting in deeper and deeper with Jacob without ever having consciously decided to progress in that direction and I didn't know what to do about it—none of these very real, very deserving of thought, very pressing concerns could take my mind off the pain in my chest for long. Eventually, I couldn't even walk anymore, because I couldn't breathe. I sat down on a patch of semidry rocks and curled up in a ball.

Jacob found me like that, and I could tell from his expression that he understood.

"Sorry," he said right away. He pulled me up from the ground and wrapped both arms around my shoulders. I hadn't realized that I was cold until then. His warmth made me shudder, but at least I could breathe with him there.

"I'm ruining your spring break," Jacob accused himself as we walked back up the beach.

"No, you're not. I didn't have any plans. I don't think I like spring breaks, anyway."

"I'll take tomorrow morning off. The others can run without me. We'll do something fun."

The word seemed out of place in my life right now, barely comprehensible, bizarre. "Fun?"

"Fun is exactly what you need. Hmm . . ." he gazed out across the heaving gray waves, deliberating. As his eyes scanned the horizon, he had a flash of inspiration.

"Got it!" he crowed. "Another promise to keep."

"What are you talking about?"

He let go of my hand and pointed toward the southern edge of the beach, where the flat, rocky half-moon dead-ended against the sheer sea cliffs. I stared, uncomprehending.

"Didn't I promise to take you cliff diving?"

I shivered.

"Yeah, it'll be pretty cold—not as cold as it is today. Can you feel the weather changing? The pressure? It will be warmer tomorrow. You up for it?"

The dark water did not look inviting, and, from this angle, the cliffs looked even higher than before.

But it had been days since I'd heard Edward's voice. That was probably part of the problem. I was addicted to the sound of my delusions. It made things worse if I went too long without them. Jumping off a cliff was certain to remedy that situation.

"Sure, I'm up for it. Fun."

"It's a date," he said, and draped his arm around my shoulders.

"Okay—now let's go get you some sleep." I didn't like the way the circles under his eyes were beginning to look permanently etched onto his skin.

I woke early the next morning and snuck a change of clothes out to the truck. I had a feeling that Charlie would approve of today's plan just about as much as he would approve of the motorcycle.

The idea of a distraction from all my worries had me almost excited. Maybe it would be fun. A date with Jacob, a date with Edward… I laughed darkly to myself. Jake could say what he wanted about us being a messed-up pair—I was the one who was truly messed up. I made the werewolf seem downright normal.

I expected Jacob to meet me out front, the way he usually did when my noisy truck announced my arrival. When he didn't, I guessed that he might still be sleeping. I would wait—let him get as much rest as he could. He needed his sleep, and that would give the day time to warm a bit more. Jake had been right about the weather, though; it had changed in the night. A thick layer of clouds pressed heavily on the atmosphere now, making it almost sultry; it was warm and close under the gray blanket. I left my sweater in the truck.

I knocked quietly on the door.

"C'mon in, Bella," Billy said.

He was at the kitchen table, eating cold cereal.

"Jake sleeping?"

"Er, no." He set his spoon down, and his eyebrows pulled together.

"What happened?" I demanded. I could tell from his expression that something had.

"Embry, Jared, and Paul crossed a fresh trail early this morning. Sam and Jake took off to help. Sam was hopeful—she's hedged herself in beside the mountains. He thinks they have a good chance to finish this."

"Oh, no, Billy," I whispered. "Oh, no."

He chuckled, deep and low. "Do you really like La Push so well that you want to extend your sentence here?"

"Don't make jokes, Billy. This is too scary for that."

"You're right," he agreed, still complacent. His ancient eyes were impossible to read. "This one's tricky."

I bit my lip.

"It's not as dangerous for them as you think it is. Sam knows what he's doing. You're the one that you should worry about. The vampire doesn't want to fight them. She's just trying to find a way around them…to you."

"How does Sam know what he's doing?" I demanded, brushing aside his concern for me. "They've only killed just the one vampire—that could have been luck."

"We take what we do very seriously, Bella. Nothing's been forgotten. Everything they need to know has been passed down from father to son for generations."

That didn't comfort me the way he probably intended it to. The memory of Victoria, wild, catlike, lethal, was

too strong in my head. If she couldn't get around the wolves, she would eventually try to go through them.

Billy went back to his breakfast; I sat down on the sofa and flipped aimlessly though the TV channels. That didn't last long. I started to feel closed in by the small room, claustrophobic, upset by the fact that I couldn't see out the curtained windows.

"I'll be at the beach," I told Billy abruptly, and hurried out the door.

Being outside didn't help as much as I'd hoped. The clouds pushed down with an invisible weight that kept the claustrophobia from easing. The forest seemed strangely vacant as I walked toward the beach. I didn't see any animals—no birds, no squirrels. I couldn't hear any birds, either. The silence was eerie; there wasn't even the sound of wind in the trees.

I knew it was all just a product of the weather, but it still made me edgy. The heavy, warm pressure of the atmosphere was perceptible even to my weak human senses, and it hinted at something major in the storm department. A glance at the sky backed this up; the clouds were churning sluggishly despite the lack of breeze on the ground. The closest clouds were a smoky gray, but between the cracks I could see another layer that was a gruesome purple color. The skies had a ferocious plan in store for today. The animals must be bunkering down.

As soon as I reached the beach, I wished I hadn't come—I'd already had enough of this place. I'd been here almost every day, wandering alone. Was it so much different from my nightmares? But where else to go? I trudged down to the driftwood tree, and sat at the end so that I could lean against the tangled roots.

I stared up at the angry sky broodingly, waiting for the first drops to break the stillness.

I tried not to think about the danger Jacob and his friends were in. Because nothing could happen to Jacob. The thought was unendurable. I'd lost too much already—would fate take the last few shreds of peace left behind? That seemed unfair, out of balance. But maybe I'd violated some unknown rule, crossed some line that had condemned me. Maybe it was wrong to be so involved with myths and legends, to turn my back on the human world. Maybe…

No. Nothing would happen to Jacob. I had to believe that or I wouldn't be able to function.

"Argh!" I groaned, and jumped off the log. I couldn't sit still; it was worse than pacing.

I'd really been counting on hearing Edward this morning. It seemed like that was the one thing that might make it bearable to live through this day. The hole had been festering lately, like it was getting revenge for the times that Jacob's presence had tamed it. The edges burned.

The waves picked up as I paced, beginning to crash against the rocks, but there was still no wind. I felt pinned down by the pressure of the storm. Everything swirled around me, but it was perfectly still where I stood. The air had a faint electric charge—I could feel the static in my hair.

Farther out, the waves were angrier than they were along the shore. I could see them battering against the line of the cliffs, spraying big white clouds of sea foam into the sky. There was still no movement in the air, though the clouds roiled more quickly now. It was eerie looking—like the clouds were moving by their

own will. I shivered, though I knew it was just a trick of the pressure.

The cliffs were a black knife edge against the livid sky. Staring at them, I remembered the day Jacob had told me about Sam and his "gang." I thought of the boys—the werewolves—throwing themselves into the empty air. The image of the falling, spiraling figures was still vivid in my mind. I imagined the utter freedom of the fall….I imagined the way Edward's voice would have sounded in my head—furious, velvet, perfect….The burning in my chest flared agonizingly.

There had to be some way to quench it. The pain was growing more and more intolerable by the second. I glared at the cliffs and the crashing waves.

Well, why not? Why not quench it right now?

Jacob had promised me cliff diving, hadn't he? Just because he was unavailable, should I have to give up the distraction I needed so badly—needed even worse because Jacob was out risking his life? Risking it, in essence, for me. If it weren't for me, Victoria would not be killing people here…just somewhere else, far away. If anything happened to Jacob, it would be my fault. That realization stabbed deep and had me jogging back up to the road toward Billy's house, where my truck waited.

I knew my way to the lane that passed closest to the cliffs, but I had to hunt for the little path that would take me out to the ledge. As I followed it, I looked for turns or forks, knowing that Jake had planned to take me off the lower outcropping rather than the top, but the path wound in a thin single line toward the brink with no options. I didn't have time to find another way down—the storm was moving in quickly now. The wind was finally beginning to touch me, the

clouds pressing closer to the ground. Just as I reached the place where the dirt path fanned out into the stone precipice, the first drops broke through and splattered on my face.

It was not hard to convince myself that I didn't have time to search for another way—I wanted to jump from the top. This was the image that had lingered in my head. I wanted the long fall that would feel like flying.

I knew that this was the stupidest, most reckless thing I had done yet. The thought made me smile. The pain was already easing, as if my body knew that Edward's voice was just seconds away….

The ocean sounded very far away, somehow farther than before, when I was on the path in the trees. I grimaced when I thought of the probable temperature of the water. But I wasn't going to let that stop me.

The wind blew stronger now, whipping the rain into eddies around me.

I stepped out to the edge, keeping my eyes on the empty space in front of me. My toes felt ahead blindly, caressing the edge of the rock when they encountered it. I drew in a deep breath and held it…waiting.

"Bella."

I smiled and exhaled.

Yes? I didn't answer out loud, for fear that the sound of my voice would shatter the beautiful illusion. He sounded so real, so close. It was only when he was disapproving like this that I could hear the true memory of his voice—the velvet texture and the

musical intonation that made up the most perfect of all voices.

“Don’t do this,” he pleaded.

You wanted me to be human, I reminded him. Well, watch me.

“Please. For me.”

But you won’t stay with me any other way.

“Please.” It was just a whisper in the blowing rain that tossed my hair and drenched my clothes—making me as wet as if this were my second jump of the day.

I rolled up onto the balls of my feet.

“No, Bella!” He was angry now, and the anger was so lovely.

I smiled and raised my arms straight out, as if I were going to dive, lifting my face into the rain. But it was too ingrained from years of swimming at the public pool—feet first, first time. I leaned forward, crouching to get more spring…

And I flung myself off the cliff.

I screamed as I dropped through the open air like a meteor, but it was a scream of exhilaration and not fear. The wind resisted, trying vainly to fight the unconquerable gravity, pushing against me and twirling me in spirals like a rocket crashing to the earth.

Yes! The word echoed through my head as I sliced through the surface of the water. It was icy, colder

than I'd feared, and yet the chill only added to the high.

I was proud of myself as I plunged deeper into the freezing black water. I hadn't had one moment of terror—just pure adrenaline. Really, the fall wasn't scary at all. Where was the challenge?

That was when the current caught me.

I'd been so preoccupied by the size of the cliffs, by the obvious danger of their high, sheer faces, that I hadn't worried at all about the dark water waiting. I never dreamed that the true menace was lurking far below me, under the heaving surf.

It felt like the waves were fighting over me, jerking me back and forth between them as if determined to share by pulling me into halves. I knew the right way to avoid a riptide: swim parallel to the beach rather than struggling for the shore. But the knowledge did me little good when I didn't know which way the shore was.

I couldn't even tell which way the surface was.

The angry water was black in every direction; there was no brightness to direct me upward. Gravity was all-powerful when it competed with the air, but it had nothing on the waves—I couldn't feel a downward pull, a sinking in any direction. Just the battering of the current that flung me round and round like a rag doll.

I fought to keep my breath in, to keep my lips locked around my last store of oxygen.

It didn't surprise me that my delusion of Edward was there. He owed me that much, considering that I was

dying. I was surprised by how sure that knowledge was. I was going to drown. I was drowning.

“Keep swimming!” Edward begged urgently in my head.

Where? There was nothing but the darkness. There was no place to swim to.

“Stop that!” he ordered. “Don’t you dare give up!”

The cold of the water was numbing my arms and legs. I didn’t feel the buffeting so much as before. It was more of just a dizziness now, a helpless spinning in the water.

But I listened to him. I forced my arms to continue reaching, my legs to kick harder, though every second I was facing a new direction. It couldn’t be doing any good. What was the point?

“Fight!” he yelled. “Damn it, Bella, keep fighting.”

Why?

I didn’t want to fight anymore. And it wasn’t the lightheadedness, or the cold, or the failure of my arms as the muscles gave out in exhaustion, that made me content to stay where I was. I was almost happy that it was over. This was an easier death than others I’d faced. Oddly peaceful.

I thought briefly of the clichés, about how you were suppose to see your life flash before your eyes. I was so much luckier. Who wanted to see a rerun, anyway?

I saw him, and I had no will to fight. It was so clear, so much more defined than any memory. My subconscious had stored Edward away in flawless

detail, saving him for this final moment. I could see his perfect face as if he were really there; the exact shade of his icy skin, the shape of his lips, the line of his jaw, the gold glinting in his furious eyes. He was angry, naturally, that I was giving up. His teeth were clenched and his nostrils flared with rage.

“No! Bella, no!”

My ears were flooded with the freezing water, but his voice was clearer than ever. I ignored his words and concentrated on the sound of his voice. Why would I fight when I was so happy where I was? Even as my lungs burned for more air and my legs cramped in the icy cold, I was content. I’d forgotten what real happiness felt like.

Happiness. It made the whole dying thing pretty bearable.

The current won at that moment, shoving me abruptly against something hard, a rock invisible in the gloom. It hit me solidly across the chest, slamming into me like an iron bar, and the breath whooshed out of my lungs, escaping in a thick cloud of silver bubbles. Water flooded down my throat, choking and burning. The iron bar seemed to be dragging me, pulling me away from Edward, deeper into the dark, to the ocean floor.

Goodbye, I love you, was my last thought.

# Chapter 16

## PARIS

At that moment, my head broke the surface.

How disorienting. I'd been sure I was sinking.

The current wouldn't let up. It was slamming me against more rocks; they beat against the center of my back sharply, rhythmically, pushing the water from my lungs. It gushed out in amazing volume, absolute torrents pouring from my mouth and nose. The salt burned and my lungs burned and my throat was too full of water to catch a breath and the rocks were hurting my back. Somehow I stayed in one place, though the waves still heaved around me. I couldn't see anything but water everywhere, reaching for my face.

"Breathe!" a voice, wild with anxiety, ordered, and I felt a cruel stab of pain when I recognized the voice—because it wasn't Edward's.

I could not obey. The waterfall pouring from my mouth didn't stop long enough for me to catch a breath. The black, icy water filled my chest, burning.

The rock smacked into my back again, right between my shoulder blades, and another volley of water choked its way out of my lungs.

"Breathe, Bella! C'mon!" Jacob begged.

Black spots bloomed across my vision, getting wider and wider, blocking out the light.

The rock struck me again.

The rock wasn't cold like the water; it was hot on my skin. I realized it was Jacob's hand, trying to beat the water from my lungs. The iron bar that had dragged me from the sea was also…warm…My head whirled, the black spots covered everything….

Was I dying again, then? I didn't like it—this wasn't as good as the last time. It was only dark now, nothing worth looking at here. The sound of the crashing waves faded into the black and became a quiet, even whoosh that sounded like it was coming from the inside of my ears….

"Bella?" Jacob asked, his voice still tense, but not as wild as before. "Bells, honey, can you hear me?"

The contents of my head swished and rolled sickeningly, like they'd joined the rough water….

"How long has she been unconscious?" someone else asked.

The voice that was not Jacob's shocked me, jarred me into a more focused awareness.

I realized that I was still. There was no tug of the current on me—the heaving was inside my head. The surface under me was flat and motionless. It felt grainy against my bare arms.

"I don't know," Jacob reported, still frantic. His voice was very close. Hands—so warm they had to be his—brushed wet hair from my cheeks. "A few minutes? It didn't take long to tow her to the beach."

The quiet whooshing inside my ears was not the waves—it was the air moving in and out of my lungs again. Each breath burned—the passageways were as

raw as if I'd scrubbed them out with steel wool. But I was breathing.

And I was freezing. A thousand sharp, icy beads were striking my face and arms, making the cold worse.

"She's breathing. She'll come around. We should get her out of the cold, though. I don't like the color she's turning...." I recognized Sam's voice this time.

"You think it's okay to move her?"

"She didn't hurt her back or anything when she fell?"

"I don't know."

They hesitated.

I tried to open my eyes. It took me a minute, but then I could see the dark, purple clouds, flinging the freezing rain down at me. "Jake?" I croaked.

Jacob's face blocked out the sky. "Oh!" he gasped, relief washing over his features. His eyes were wet from the rain. "Oh, Bella! Are you okay? Can you hear me? Do you hurt anywhere?"

"J-Just m-my throat," I stuttered, my lips quivering from the cold.

"Let's get you out of here, then," Jacob said. He slid his arms under me and lifted me without effort—like picking up an empty box. His chest was bare and warm; he hunched his shoulders to keep the rain off of me. My head lolled over his arm. I stared vacantly back toward the furious water, beating the sand behind him.

"You got her?" I heard Sam ask.

"Yeah, I'll take it from here. Get back to the hospital. I'll join you later. Thanks, Sam."

My head was still rolling. None of his words sunk in at first. Sam didn't answer. There was no sound, and I wondered if he were already gone.

The water licked and writhed up the sand after us as Jacob carried me away, like it was angry that I'd escaped. As I stared wearily, a spark of color caught my unfocused eyes—a small flash of fire was dancing on the black water, far out in the bay. The image made no sense, and I wondered how conscious I really was. My head swirled with the memory of the black, churning water—of being so lost that I couldn't find up or down. So lost…but somehow Jacob…

"How did you find me?" I rasped.

"I was searching for you," he told me. He was half-jogging through the rain, up the beach toward the road. "I followed the tire tracks to your truck, and then I heard you scream…." He shuddered. "Why would you jump, Bella? Didn't you notice that it's turning into a hurricane out here? Couldn't you have waited for me?" Anger filled his tone as the relief faded.

"Sorry," I muttered. "It was stupid."

"Yeah, it was really stupid," he agreed, drops of rain shaking free of his hair as he nodded. "Look, do you mind saving the stupid stuff for when I'm around? I won't be able to concentrate if I think you're jumping off cliffs behind my back."

"Sure," I agreed. "No problem." I sounded like a chain-smoker. I tried to clear my throat—and then winced; the throat-clearing felt like stabbing a knife down

there. “What happened today? Did you…find her?” It was my turn to shudder, though I wasn’t so cold here, right next to his ridiculous body heat.

Jacob shook his head. He was still more running than walking as he headed up the road to his house. “No. She took off into the water—the bloodsuckers have the advantage there. That’s why I raced home—I was afraid she was going to double back swimming. You spend so much time on the beach….” He trailed off, a catch in his throat.

“Sam came back with you…is everyone else home, too?” I hoped they weren’t still out searching for her.

“Yeah. Sort of.”

I tried to read his expression, squinting into the hammering rain. His eyes were tight with worry or pain.

The words that hadn’t made sense before suddenly did. “You said…hospital. Before, to Sam. Is someone hurt? Did she fight you?” My voice jumped up an octave, sounding strange with the hoarseness.

“No, no. When we got back, Em was waiting with the news. It’s Harry Clearwater. Harry had a heart attack this morning.”

“Harry?” I shook my head, trying to absorb what he was staying. “Oh, no! Does Charlie know?”

“Yeah. He’s over there, too, with my dad.”

“Is Harry going to be okay?”

Jacob’s eyes tightened again. “It doesn’t look so great right now.”

Abruptly, I felt really sick with guilt—felt truly horrible about the brainless cliff dive. Nobody needed to be worrying about me right now. What a stupid time to be reckless.

“What can I do?” I asked.

At that moment the rain stopped. I hadn’t realized we were already back to Jacob’s house until he walked through the door. The storm pounded against the roof.

“You can stay here,” Jacob said as he dumped me on the short couch. “I mean it—right here. I’ll get you some dry clothes.”

I let my eyes adjust to the dark room while Jacob banged around in his bedroom. The cramped front room seemed so empty without Billy, almost desolate. It was strangely ominous—probably just because I knew where he was.

Jacob was back in seconds. He threw a pile of gray cotton at me. “These will be huge on you, but it’s the best I’ve got. I’ll, er, step outside so you can change.”

“Don’t go anywhere. I’m too tired to move yet. Just stay with me.”

Jacob sat on the floor next to me, his back against the couch. I wondered when he’d slept last. He looked as exhausted as I felt.

He leaned his head on the cushion next to mine and yawned. “Guess I could rest for a minute....”

His eyes closed. I let mine slide shut, too.

Poor Harry. Poor Sue. I knew Charlie was going to be beside himself. Harry was one of his best friends. Despite Jake's negative take on things, I hoped fervently that Harry would pull through. For Charlie's sake. For Sue's and Leah's and Seth's…

Billy's sofa was right next to the radiator, and I was warm now, despite my soaked clothes. My lungs ached in a way that pushed me toward unconsciousness rather than keeping me awake. I wondered vaguely if it was wrong to sleep…or was I getting drowning mixed up with concussions…? Jacob began softly snoring, and the sound of it soothed like a lullaby. I fell asleep quickly.

For the first time in a very long time, my dream was just a normal dream. Just a blurred wandering through old memories—blinding bright visions of the Phoenix sun, my mother's face, a ramshackle tree house, a faded quilt, a wall of mirrors, a flame on the black water…I forgot each of them as soon as the picture changed.

The last picture was the only one that stuck in my head. It was meaningless—just a set on a stage. A balcony at night, a painted moon hanging in the sky. I watched the girl in her nightdress lean on the railing and talk to herself.

Meaningless…but when I slowly struggled back to consciousness, Juliet was on my mind.

Jacob was still asleep; he'd slumped down to the floor and his breathing was deep and even. The house was darker now than before, it was black outside the window. I was stiff, but warm and almost dry. The inside of my throat burned with every breath I took.

I was going to have to get up—at least to get a drink. But my body just wanted to lie here limp, to never move again.

Instead of moving, I thought about Juliet some more.

I wondered what she would have done if Romeo had left her, not because he was banished, but because he lost interest? What if Rosalind had given him the time of day, and he'd changed his mind? What if, instead of marrying Juliet, he'd just disappeared?

I thought I knew how Juliet would feel.

She wouldn't go back to her old life, not really. She wouldn't ever have moved on, I was sure of that. Even if she'd lived until she was old and gray, every time she closed her eyes, it would have been Romeo's face she saw behind her lids. She would have accepted that, eventually.

I wondered if she would have married Paris in the end, just to please her parents, to keep the peace. No, probably not, I decided. But then, the story didn't say much about Paris. He was just a stick figure—a placeholder, a threat, a deadline to force her hand.

What if there were more to Paris?

What if Paris had been Juliet's friend? Her very best friend? What if he was the only one she could confide in about the whole devastating thing with Romeo? The one person who really understood her and made her feel halfway human again? What if he was patient and kind? What if he took care of her? What if Juliet knew she couldn't survive without him? What if he really loved her, and wanted her to be happy?

And…what if she loved Paris? Not like Romeo. Nothing like that, of course. But enough that she wanted him to be happy, too?

Jacob's slow, deep breathing was the only sound in the room—like a lullaby hummed to a child, like the whisper of a rocking chair, like the ticking of an old clock when you had nowhere you needed to go….It was the sound of comfort.

If Romeo was really gone, never coming back, would it have mattered whether or not Juliet had taken Paris up on his offer? Maybe she should have tried to settle into the leftover scraps of life that were left behind. Maybe that would have been as close to happiness as she could get.

I sighed, and then groaned when the sigh scraped my throat. I was reading too much into the story. Romeo wouldn't change his mind. That's why people still remembered his name, always twined with hers: Romeo and Juliet. That's why it was a good story. "Juliet gets dumped and ends up with Paris" would have never been a hit.

I closed my eyes and drifted again, letting my mind wander away from the stupid play I didn't want to think about anymore. I thought about reality instead—about jumping off the cliff and what a brainless mistake that had been. And not just the cliff, but the motorcycles and the whole irresponsible Evel Knievel bit. What if something bad happened to me? What would that do to Charlie? Harry's heart attack had pushed everything suddenly into perspective for me. Perspective that I didn't want to see, because—if I admitted to the truth of it—it would mean that I would have to change my ways. Could I live like that?

Maybe. It wouldn't be easy; in fact, it would be downright miserable to give up my hallucinations and try to be a grown-up. But maybe I should do it. And maybe I could. If I had Jacob.

I couldn't make that decision right now. It hurt too much. I'd think about something else.

Images from my ill-considered afternoon stunt rolled through my head while I tried to come up with something pleasant to think about…the feel of the air as I fell, the blackness of the water, the thrashing of the current…Edward's face…I lingered there for a long time. Jacob's warm hands, trying to beat life back into me…the stinging rain flung down by the purple clouds…the strange fire on the waves…

There was something familiar about that flash of color on top of the water. Of course it couldn't really be fire—

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a car squelching through the mud on the road outside. I heard it stop in front of the house, and doors started opening and closing. I thought about sitting up, and then decided against that idea.

Billy's voice was easily identifiable, but he kept it uncharacteristically low, so that it was only a gravelly grumble.

The door opened, and the light flicked on. I blinked, momentarily blind. Jake startled awake, gasping and jumping to his feet.

"Sorry," Billy grunted. "Did we wake you?"

My eyes slowly focused on his face, and then, as I could read his expression, they filled with tears.

"Oh, no, Billy!" I moaned.

He nodded slowly, his expression hard with grief. Jake hurried to his father and took one of his hands. The pain made his face suddenly childlike—it looked odd on top of the man's body.

Sam was right behind Billy, pushing his chair through the door. His normal composure was absent from his agonized face.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered.

Billy nodded. "It's gonna be hard all around."

"Where's Charlie?"

"Your dad is still at the hospital with Sue. There are a lot of…arrangements to be made."

I swallowed hard.

"I'd better get back there," Sam mumbled, and he ducked hastily out the door.

Billy pulled his hand away from Jacob, and then he rolled himself through the kitchen toward his room.

Jake stared after him for a minute, then came to sit on the floor beside me again. He put his face in his hands. I rubbed his shoulder, wishing I could think of anything to say.

After a long moment, Jacob caught my hand and held it to his face.

"How are you feeling? Are you okay? I probably should have taken you to a doctor or something." He sighed.

"Don't worry about me," I croaked.

He twisted his head to look at me. His eyes were rimmed in red. "You don't look so good."

"I don't feel so good, either, I guess."

"I'll go get your truck and then take you home—you probably ought to be there when Charlie gets back."

"Right."

I lay listlessly on the sofa while I waited for him. Billy was silent in the other room. I felt like a peeping tom, peering through the cracks at a private sorrow that wasn't mine.

It didn't take Jake long. The roar of my truck's engine broke the silence before I expected it. He helped me up from the couch without speaking, keeping his arm around my shoulder when the cold air outside made me shiver. He took the driver's seat without asking, and then pulled me next to his side to keep his arm tight around me. I leaned my head against his chest.

"How will you get home?" I asked.

"I'm not going home. We still haven't caught the bloodsucker, remember?"

My next shudder had nothing to do with cold.

It was a quiet ride after that. The cold air had woken me up. My mind was alert, and it was working very hard and very fast.

What if? What was the right thing to do?

I couldn't imagine my life without Jacob now—I cringed away from the idea of even trying to imagine that. Somehow, he'd become essential to my survival. But to leave things the way they were…was that cruel, as Mike had accused?

I remembered wishing that Jacob were my brother. I realized now that all I really wanted was a claim on him. It didn't feel brotherly when he held me like this. It just felt nice—warm and comforting and familiar. Safe. Jacob was a safe harbor.

I could stake a claim. I had that much within my power.

I'd have to tell him everything, I knew that. It was the only way to be fair. I'd have to explain it right, so that he'd know I wasn't settling, that he was much too good for me. He already knew I was broken, that part wouldn't surprise him, but he'd need to know the extent of it. I'd even have to admit that I was crazy—explain about the voices I heard. He'd need to know everything before he made a decision.

But, even as I recognized that necessity, I knew he would take me in spite of it all. He wouldn't even pause to think it through.

I would have to commit to this—commit as much of me as there was left, every one of the broken pieces. It was the only way to be fair to him. Would I? Could I?

Would it be so wrong to try to make Jacob happy? Even if the love I felt for him was no more than a weak echo of what I was capable of, even if my heart was far away, wandering and grieving after my fickle Romeo, would it be so very wrong?

Jacob stopped the truck in front of my dark house, cutting the engine so it was suddenly silent. Like so many other times, he seemed to be in tune with my thoughts now.

He threw his other arm around me, crushing me against his chest, binding me to him. Again, this felt nice. Almost like being a whole person again.

I thought he would be thinking of Harry, but then he spoke, and his tone was apologetic. “Sorry. I know you don’t feel exactly the way I do, Bells. I swear I don’t mind. I’m just so glad you’re okay that I could sing—and that’s something no one wants to hear.” He laughed his throaty laugh in my ear.

My breathing kicked up a notch, sanding the walls of my throat.

Wouldn’t Edward, indifferent as he might be, want me to be as happy as was possible under the circumstances? Wouldn’t enough friendly emotion linger for him to want that much for me? I thought he would. He wouldn’t begrudge me this: giving just a small bit of the love he didn’t want to my friend Jacob. After all, it wasn’t the same love at all.

Jake pressed his warm cheek against the top of my hair.

If I turned my face to the side—if I pressed my lips against his bare shoulder…I knew without any doubt exactly what would follow. It would be very easy. There would be no need for explanations tonight.

But could I do it? Could I betray my absent heart to save my pathetic life?

Butterflies assaulted my stomach as I thought about turning my head.

And then, as clearly as if I were in immediate danger, Edward's velvet voice whispered in my ear.

"Be happy," he told me.

I froze.

Jacob felt me stiffen and released me automatically, reaching for the door.

Wait, I wanted to say. Just a minute. But I was still locked in place, listening to the echo of Edward's voice in my head.

Storm-cooled air blew through the cab of the truck.

"OH!" The breath whooshed out of Jacob like someone had punched him in the gut. "Holy crap!"

He slammed the door and twisted the keys in the ignition in the same moment. His hands were shaking so hard I didn't know how he managed it.

"What's wrong?"

He revved the engine too fast; it sputtered and faltered.

"Vampire," he spit out.

The blood rushed from my head and left me dizzy. "How do you know?"

"Because I can smell it! Dammit!"

Jacob's eyes were wild, raking the dark street. He barely seemed aware of the tremors that were rolling through his body. "Phase or get her out of here?" he hissed at himself.

He looked down at me for a split second, taking in my horror-struck eyes and white face, and then he was scanning the street again. "Right. Get you out."

The engine caught with a roar. The tires squealed as he spun the truck around, turning toward our only escape. The headlights washed across the pavement, lit the front line of the black forest, and finally glinted off a car parked across the street from my house.

"Stop!" I gasped.

It was a black car—a car I knew. I might be the furthest thing from an autophile, but I could tell you everything about that particular car. It was a Mercedes S55 AMG. I knew the horsepower and the color of the interior. I knew the feel of the powerful engine purring through the frame. I knew the rich smell of the leather seats and the way the extra-dark tint made noon look like dusk through those windows.

It was Carlisle's car.

"Stop!" I cried again, louder this time, because Jacob was gunning the truck down the street.

"What?!"

"It's not Victoria. Stop, stop! I want to go back."

He stomped on the brake so hard I had to catch myself against the dashboard.

"What?" he asked again, aghast. He stared at me with horror in his eyes.

"It's Carlisle's car! It's the Cullens. I know it."

He watched dawn break across my face, and a violent tremor rocked his frame.

"Hey, calm down, Jake. It's okay. No danger, see? Relax."

"Yeah, calm," he panted, putting his head down and closing his eyes. While he concentrated on not exploding into a wolf, I stared out the back window at the black car.

It was just Carlisle, I told myself. Don't expect anything more. Maybe Esme…Stop right there, I told myself. Just Carlisle. That was plenty. More than I'd ever hoped to have again.

"There's a vampire in your house," Jacob hissed. "And you want to go back?"

I glanced at him, ripping my unwilling eyes off the Mercedes—terrified that it would disappear the second I looked away.

"Of course," I said, my voice blank with surprise at his question. Of course I wanted to go back.

Jacob's face hardened while I stared at him, congealing into the bitter mask that I'd thought was gone for good. Just before he had the mask in place, I caught the spasm of betrayal that flashed in his eyes. His hands were still shaking. He looked ten years older than me.

He took a deep breath. “You’re sure it’s not a trick?” he asked in a slow, heavy voice.

“It’s not a trick. It’s Carlisle. Take me back!”

A shudder rippled through his wide shoulders, but his eyes were flat and emotionless. “No.”

“Jake, it’s okay—”

“No. Take yourself back, Bella.” His voice was a slap—I flinched as the sound of it struck me. His jaw clenched and unclenched.

“Look, Bella,” he said in the same hard voice. “I can’t go back. Treaty or no treaty, that’s my enemy in there.”

“It’s not like that—”

“I have to tell Sam right away. This changes things. We can’t be caught on their territory.”

“Jake, it’s not a war!”

He didn’t listen. He put the truck in neutral and jumped out the door, leaving it running.

“Bye, Bella,” he called back over his shoulder. “I really hope you don’t die.” He sprinted into the darkness, shaking so hard that his shape seemed blurred; he disappeared before I could open my mouth to call him back.

Remorse pinned me against the seat for one long second. What had I just done to Jacob?

But remorse couldn’t hold me very long.

I slid across the seat and put the truck back in drive. My hands were shaking almost as hard as Jake's had been, and this took a minute of concentration. Then I carefully turned the truck around and drove it back to my house.

It was very dark when I turned off the headlights. Charlie had left in such a hurry that he'd forgotten to leave the porch lamp on. I felt a pang of doubt, staring at the house, deep in shadow. What if it was a trick?

I looked back at the black car, almost invisible in the night. No. I knew that car.

Still, my hands were shaking even worse than before as I reached for the key above the door. When I grabbed the doorknob to unlock it, it twisted easily under my hand. I let the door fall open. The hallway was black.

I wanted to call out a greeting, but my throat was too dry. I couldn't quite seem to catch my breath.

I took a step inside and fumbled for the light switch. It was so black—like the black water…Where was that switch?

Just like the black water, with the orange flame flickering impossibly on top of it. Flame that couldn't be a fire, but what then…? My fingers traced the wall, still searching, still shaking—

Suddenly, something Jacob had told me this afternoon echoed in my head, finally sinking in….She took off into the water, he'd said. The bloodsuckers have the advantage there. That's why I raced home—I was afraid she was going to double back swimming.

My hand froze in its searching, my whole body froze into place, as I realized why I recognized the strange orange color on the water.

Victoria's hair, blowing wild in the wind, the color of fire…

She'd been right there. Right there in the harbor with me and Jacob. If Sam hadn't been there, if it had been just the two of us…? I couldn't breathe or move.

The light flicked on, though my frozen hand had still not found the switch.

I blinked into the sudden light, and saw that someone was there, waiting for me.

# Chapter 17

## VISITOR

Unnaturally still and white, with her large black eyes intent on my face, my visitor waited perfectly motionless in the center of the hall, beautiful beyond imagining.

My knees trembled for a second, and I nearly fell. Then I hurled myself at her.

"Alice, oh, Alice!" I cried, as I slammed into her.

I'd forgotten how hard she was; it was like running headlong into a wall of cement.

"Bella?" There was a strange mingling of relief and confusion in her voice.

I locked my arms around her, gasping to inhale as much of the scent of her skin as possible. It wasn't like anything else—not floral or spice, citrus or musk. No perfume in the world could compare. My memory hadn't done it justice.

I didn't notice when the gasping turned into something else—I only realized I was sobbing when Alice dragged me to the living room couch and pulled me into her lap. It was like curling up into a cool stone, but a stone that was contoured comfortingly to the shape of my body. She rubbed my back in a gentle rhythm, waiting for me to get control of myself.

"I'm…sorry," I blubbered. "I'm just…so happy…to see you!"

"It's okay, Bella. Everything's okay."

"Yes," I bawled. And, for once, it seemed that way.

Alice sighed. "I'd forgotten how exuberant you are," she said, and her tone was disapproving.

I looked up at her through my streaming eyes. Alice's neck was tight, straining away from me, her lips pressed together firmly. Her eyes were black as pitch.

"Oh," I puffed, as I realized the problem. She was thirsty. And I smelled appetizing. It had been a while since I'd had to think about that kind of thing. "Sorry."

"It's my own fault. It's been too long since I hunted. I shouldn't let myself get so thirsty. But I was in a hurry today." The look she directed at me then was a glare. "Speaking of which, would you like to explain to me how you're alive?"

That brought me up short and stopped the sobs. I realized what must have happened immediately, and why Alice was here.

I swallowed loudly. "You saw me fall."

"No," she disagreed, her eyes narrowing. "I saw you jump."

I pursed my lips as I tried to think of an explanation that wouldn't sound nuts.

Alice shook her head. "I told him this would happen, but he didn't believe me. 'Bella promised,'" her voice imitated his so perfectly that I froze in shock while the pain ripped through my torso. "'Don't be looking for her future, either,'" she continued to quote him. "'We've done enough damage.'

"But just because I'm not looking, doesn't mean I don't see," she went on. "I wasn't keeping tabs on you, I swear, Bella. It's just that I'm already attuned to you…when I saw you jumping, I didn't think, I just got on a plane. I knew I would be too late, but I couldn't do nothing. And then I get here, thinking maybe I could help Charlie somehow, and you drive up." She shook her head, this time in confusion. Her voice was strained. "I saw you go into the water and I waited and waited for you to come up, but you didn't. What happened? And how could you do that to Charlie? Did you stop to think what this would do to him? And my brother? Do you have any idea what Edward—"

I cut her off then, as soon as she said his name. I'd let her go on, even after I realized the misunderstanding she was under, just to hear the perfect bell tone of her voice. But it was time to interrupt.

"Alice, I wasn't committing suicide."

She eyed me dubiously. "Are you saying you didn't jump off a cliff?"

"No, but…" I grimaced. "It was for recreational purposes only."

Her expression hardened.

"I'd seen some of Jacob's friends cliff diving," I insisted. "It looked like…fun, and I was bored…."

She waited.

"I didn't think about how the storm would affect the currents. Actually, I didn't think about the water much at all."

Alice didn't buy it. I could see that she still thought I had been trying to kill myself. I decided to redirect. "So if you saw me go in, why didn't you see Jacob?"

She cocked her head to the side, distracted.

I continued. "It's true that I probably would have drowned if Jacob hadn't jumped in after me. Well, okay, there's no probably about it. But he did, and he pulled me out, and I guess he towed me back to shore, though I was kind of out for that part. It couldn't have been more than a minute that I was under before he grabbed me. How come you didn't see that?"

She frowned in perplexity. "Someone pulled you out?"

"Yes. Jacob saved me."

I watched curiously as an enigmatic range of emotions flitted across her face. Something was bothering her—her imperfect vision? But I wasn't sure. Then she deliberately leaned in and sniffed my shoulder.

I froze.

"Don't be ridiculous," she muttered, sniffing at me some more.

"What are you doing?"

She ignored my question. "Who was with you out there just now? It sounded like you were arguing."

"Jacob Black. He's…sort of my best friend, I guess. At least, he was . . ." I thought of Jacob's angry, betrayed face, and wondered what he was to me now.

Alice nodded, seeming preoccupied.

“What?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’m not sure what it means.”

“Well, I’m not dead, at least.”

She rolled her eyes. “He was a fool to think you could survive alone. I’ve never seen anyone so prone to life-threatening idiocy.”

“I survived,” I pointed out.

She was thinking of something else. “So, if the currents were too much for you, how did this Jacob manage?”

“Jacob is…strong.”

She heard the reluctance in my voice, and her eyebrows rose.

I gnawed on my lip for a second. Was this a secret, or not? And if it was, then who was my greatest allegiance to? Jacob, or Alice?

It was too hard to keep secrets, I decided. Jacob knew everything, why not Alice, too?

“See, well, he’s…sort of a werewolf,” I admitted in a rush. “The Quileutes turn into wolves when there are vampires around. They know Carlisle from a long time ago. Were you with Carlisle back then?”

Alice gawked at me for a moment, and then recovered herself, blinking rapidly. “Well, I guess that explains the smell,” she muttered. “But does it explain what I

didn't see?" She frowned, her porcelain forehead creasing.

"The smell?" I repeated.

"You smell awful," she said absently, still frowning. "A werewolf? Are you sure about that?"

"Very sure," I promised, wincing as I remembered Paul and Jacob fighting in the road. "I guess you weren't with Carlisle the last time there were werewolves here in Forks?"

"No. I hadn't found him yet." Alice was still lost in thought. Suddenly, her eyes widened, and she turned to stare at me with a shocked expression. "Your best friend is a werewolf?"

I nodded sheepishly.

"How long has this been going on?"

"Not long," I said, my voice sounding defensive. "He's only been a werewolf for just a few weeks."

She glowered at me. "A young werewolf? Even worse! Edward was right—you're a magnet for danger. Weren't you supposed to be staying out of trouble?"

"There's nothing wrong with werewolves," I grumbled, stung by her critical tone.

"Until they lose their tempers." She shook her head sharply from side to side. "Leave it to you, Bella. Anyone else would be better off when the vampires left town. But you have to start hanging out with the first monsters you can find."

I didn't want to argue with Alice—I was still trembling with joy that she was really, truly here, that I could touch her marble skin and hear her wind-chime voice—but she had it all wrong.

"No, Alice, the vampires didn't really leave—not all of them, anyway. That's the whole trouble. If it weren't for the werewolves, Victoria would have gotten me by now. Well, if it weren't for Jake and his friends, Laurent would have gotten me before she could, I guess, so—"

"Victoria?" she hissed. "Laurent?"

I nodded, a teensy bit alarmed by the expression in her black eyes. I pointed at my chest. "Danger magnet, remember?"

She shook her head again. "Tell me everything—start at the beginning."

I glossed over the beginning, skipping the motorcycles and the voices, but telling her everything else right up to today's misadventure. Alice didn't like my thin explanation about boredom and the cliffs, so I hurried on to the strange flame I'd seen on the water and what I thought it meant. Her eyes narrowed almost to slits at that part. It was strange to see her look so…so dangerous—like a vampire. I swallowed hard and went on with the rest about Harry.

She listened to my story without interrupting. Occasionally, she would shake her head, and the crease in her forehead deepened until it looked like it was carved permanently into the marble of her skin. She didn't speak and, finally, I fell quiet, struck again by the borrowed grief at Harry's passing. I thought of Charlie; he would be home soon. What condition would he be in?

"Our leaving didn't do you any good at all, did it?" Alice murmured.

I laughed once—it was a slightly hysterical sound. "That was never the point, though, was it? It's not like you left for my benefit."

Alice scowled at the floor for a moment. "Well…I guess I acted impulsively today. I probably shouldn't have intruded."

I could feel the blood draining from my face. My stomach dropped. "Don't go, Alice," I whispered. My fingers locked around the collar of her white shirt and I began to hyperventilate. "Please don't leave me."

Her eyes opened wider. "All right," she said, enunciating each word with slow precision. "I'm not going anywhere tonight. Take a deep breath."

I tried to obey, though I couldn't quite locate my lungs.

She watched my face while I concentrated on my breathing. She waited till I was calmer to comment.

"You look like hell, Bella."

"I drowned today," I reminded her.

"It goes deeper than that. You're a mess."

I flinched. "Look, I'm doing my best."

"What do you mean?"

"It hasn't been easy. I'm working on it."

She frowned. "I told him," she said to herself.

"Alice," I sighed. "What did you think you were going to find? I mean, besides me dead? Did you expect to find me skipping around and whistling show tunes? You know me better than that."

"I do. But I hoped."

"Then I guess I don't have the corner on the idiocy market."

The phone rang.

"That has to be Charlie," I said, staggering to my feet. I grabbed Alice's stone hand and dragged her with me to the kitchen. I wasn't about to let her out of my sight.

"Charlie?" I answered the phone.

"No, it's me," Jacob said.

"Jake!"

Alice scrutinized my expression.

"Just making sure you were still alive," Jacob said sourly.

"I'm fine. I told you that it wasn't—"

"Yeah. I got it. 'Bye."

Jacob hung up on me.

I sighed and let my head hang back, staring at the ceiling. "That's going to be a problem."

Alice squeezed my hand. "They aren't excited I'm here."

"Not especially. But it's none of their business anyway."

Alice put her arm around me. "So what do we do now?" she mused. She seemed to talk to herself for a moment. "Things to do. Loose ends to tie."

"What things to do?"

Her face was suddenly careful. "I don't know for sure… I need to see Carlisle."

Would she leave so soon? My stomach dropped.

"Could you stay?" I begged. "Please? For just a little while. I've missed you so much." My voice broke.

"If you think that's a good idea." Her eyes were unhappy.

"I do. You can stay here—Charlie would love that."

"I have a house, Bella."

I nodded, disappointed but resigned. She hesitated, studying me.

"Well, I need to go get a suitcase of clothes, at the very least."

I threw my arms around her. "Alice, you're the best!"

"And I think I'll need to hunt. Immediately," she added in a strained voice.

"Oops." I took a step back.

"Can you stay out of trouble for one hour?" she asked skeptically. Then, before I could answer, she held up

one finger and closed her eyes. Her face went smooth and blank for a few seconds.

And then her eyes opened and she answered her own question. “Yes, you’ll be fine. For tonight, anyway.” She grimaced. Even making faces, she looked like an angel.

“You’ll come back?” I asked in a small voice.

“I promise—one hour.”

I glanced at the clock over the kitchen table. She laughed and leaned in quickly to kiss me on the cheek. Then she was gone.

I took a deep breath. Alice would be back. I suddenly felt so much better.

I had plenty to do to keep myself busy while I waited. A shower was definitely first on the agenda. I sniffed my shoulders as I undressed, but I couldn’t smell anything but the brine and seaweed scent of the ocean. I wondered what Alice had meant about me smelling bad.

When I was cleaned up, I went back to the kitchen. I couldn’t see any signs that Charlie had eaten recently, and he would probably be hungry when he got back. I hummed tunelessly to myself as I moved around the kitchen.

While Thursday’s casserole rotated in the microwave, I made up the couch with sheets and an old pillow. Alice wouldn’t need it, but Charlie would need to see it. I was careful not to watch the clock. There was no reason to start myself panicking; Alice had promised.

I hurried through my dinner, not tasting it—just feeling the ache as it slid down my raw throat. Mostly I was thirsty; I must have drunk a half gallon of water by the time I was finished. All the salt in my system had dehydrated me.

I went to go try to watch TV while I waited.

Alice was already there, sitting on her improvised bed. Her eyes were a liquid butterscotch. She smiled and patted the pillow. "Thanks."

"You're early," I said, elated.

I sat down next to her and leaned my head on her shoulder. She put her cold arms around me and sighed.

"Bella. What are we going to do with you?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "I really have been trying my hardest."

"I believe you."

It was silent.

"Does—does he . . ." I took a deep breath. It was harder to say his name out loud, even though I was able to think it now. "Does Edward know you're here?" I couldn't help asking. It was my pain, after all. I'd deal with it when she was gone, I promised myself, and felt sick at the thought.

"No."

There was only one way that could be true. "He's not with Carlisle and Esme?"

"He checks in every few months."

"Oh." He must still be out enjoying his distractions. I focused my curiosity on a safer topic. "You said you flew here....Where did you come from?"

"I was in Denali. Visiting Tanya's family."

"Is Jasper here? Did he come with you?"

She shook her head. "He didn't approve of my interfering. We promised...." she trailed off, and then her tone changed. "And you think Charlie won't mind my being here?" she asked, sounding worried.

"Charlie thinks you're wonderful, Alice."

"Well, we're about to find out."

Sure enough, a few seconds later I heard the cruiser pull into the driveway. I jumped up and hurried to open the door.

Charlie trudged slowly up the walk, his eyes on the ground and his shoulders slumped. I walked forward to meet him; he didn't even see me until I hugged him around the waist. He embraced me back fiercely.

"I'm so sorry about Harry, Dad."

"I'm really going to miss him," Charlie mumbled.

"How's Sue doing?"

"She seems dazed, like she hasn't grasped it yet. Sam's staying with her...." The volume of his voice faded in and out. "Those poor kids. Leah's just a year older than you, and Seth is only fourteen...." He shook his head.

He kept his arms tight around me as he started toward the door again.

“Um, Dad?” I figured I’d better warn him. “You’ll never guess who’s here.”

He looked at me blankly. His head swiveled around, and he spied the Mercedes across the street, the porch light reflecting off the glossy black paint. Before he could react, Alice was in the doorway.

“Hi, Charlie,” she said in a subdued voice. “I’m sorry I came at such a bad time.”

“Alice Cullen?” he peered at the slight figure in front of him as if he doubted what his eyes were telling him. “Alice, is that you?”

“It’s me,” she confirmed. “I was in the neighborhood.”

“Is Carlisle . . .?”

“No, I’m alone.”

Both Alice and I knew he wasn’t really asking about Carlisle. His arm tightened over my shoulder.

“She can stay here, can’t she?” I pleaded. “I already asked her.”

“Of course,” Charlie said mechanically. “We’d love to have you, Alice.”

“Thank you, Charlie. I know it’s horrid timing.”

“No, it’s fine, really. I’m going to be really busy doing what I can for Harry’s family; it will be nice for Bella to have some company.”

"There's dinner for you on the table, Dad," I told him.

"Thanks, Bell." He gave me one more squeeze before he shuffled toward the kitchen.

Alice went back to the couch, and I followed her. This time, she was the one to pull me against her shoulder.

"You look tired."

"Yeah," I agreed, and shrugged. "Near-death experiences do that to me....So, what does Carlisle think of you being here?"

"He doesn't know. He and Esme were on a hunting trip. I'll hear from him in a few days, when he gets back."

"You won't tell him, though...when he checks in again?" I asked. She knew I didn't mean Carlisle now.

"No. He'd bite my head off," Alice said grimly.

I laughed once, and then sighed.

I didn't want to sleep. I wanted to stay up all night talking to Alice. And it didn't make sense for me to be tired, what with crashing on Jacob's couch all day. But drowning really had taken a lot out of me, and my eyes wouldn't stay open. I rested my head on her stone shoulder, and drifted into a more peaceful oblivion than I had any hope of.

I woke early, from a deep and dreamless sleep, feeling well-rested, but stiff. I was on the couch tucked under the blankets I'd laid out for Alice, and I could hear her and Charlie talking in the kitchen. It sounded like Charlie was fixing her breakfast.

"How bad was it, Charlie?" Alice asked softly, and at first I thought they were talking about the Clearwaters.

Charlie sighed. "Real bad."

"Tell me about it. I want to know exactly what happened when we left."

There was a pause while a cupboard door was closed and a dial on the stove was clicked off. I waited, cringing.

"I've never felt so helpless," Charlie began slowly. "I didn't know what to do. That first week—I thought I was going to have to hospitalize her. She wouldn't eat or drink, she wouldn't move. Dr. Gerandy was throwing around words like 'catatonic,' but I didn't let him up to see her. I was afraid it would scare her."

"She snapped out of it though?"

"I had Reneé come to take her to Florida. I just didn't want to be the one…if she had to go to a hospital or something. I hoped being with her mother would help. But when we started packing her clothes, she woke up with a vengeance. I've never seen Bella throw a fit like that. She was never one for the tantrums, but, boy, did she fly into a fury. She threw her clothes everywhere and screamed that we couldn't make her leave—and then she finally started crying. I thought that would be the turning point. I didn't argue when she insisted on staying here…and she did seem to get better at first…."

Charlie trailed off. It was hard listening to this, knowing how much pain I'd caused him.

"But?" Alice prompted.

"She went back to school and work, she ate and slept and did her homework. She answered when someone asked her a direct question. But she was…empty. Her eyes were blank. There were lots of little things—she wouldn't listen to music anymore; I found a bunch of CDs broken in the trash. She didn't read; she wouldn't be in the same room when the TV was on, not that she watched it so much before. I finally figured it out—she was avoiding everything that might remind her of…him.

"We could hardly talk; I was so worried about saying something that would upset her—the littlest things would make her flinch—and she never volunteered anything. She would just answer if I asked her something.

"She was alone all the time. She didn't call her friends back, and after a while, they stopped calling.

"It was night of the living dead around here. I still hear her screaming in her sleep…."

I could almost see him shuddering. I shuddered, too, remembering. And then I sighed. I hadn't fooled him at all, not for one second.

"I'm so sorry, Charlie," Alice said, voice glum.

"It's not your fault." The way he said it made it perfectly clear that he was holding someone responsible. "You were always a good friend to her."

"She seems better now, though."

"Yeah. Ever since she started hanging out with Jacob Black, I've noticed a real improvement. She has some color in her cheeks when she comes home, some light in her eyes. She's happier." He paused, and his voice

was different when he spoke again. “He’s a year or so younger than her, and I know she used to think of him as a friend, but I think maybe it’s something more now, or headed that direction, anyway.” Charlie said this in a tone that was almost belligerent. It was a warning, not for Alice, but for her to pass along. “Jake’s old for his years,” he continued, still sounding defensive. “He’s taken care of his father physically the way Bella took care of her mother emotionally. It matured him. He’s a good-looking kid, too—takes after his mom’s side. He’s good for Bella, you know,” Charlie insisted.

“Then it’s good she has him,” Alice agreed.

Charlie sighed out a big gust of air, folding quickly to the lack of opposition. “Okay, so I guess that’s overstating things. I don’t know…even with Jacob, now and then I see something in her eyes, and I wonder if I’ve ever grasped how much pain she’s really in. It’s not normal, Alice, and it…it frightens me. Not normal at all. Not like someone…left her, but like someone died.” His voice cracked.

It was like someone had died—like I had died. Because it had been more than just losing the truest of true loves, as if that were not enough to kill anyone. It was also losing a whole future, a whole family—the whole life that I’d chosen….

Charlie went on in a hopeless tone. “I don’t know if she’s going to get over it—I’m not sure if it’s in her nature to heal from something like this. She’s always been such a constant little thing. She doesn’t get past things, change her mind.”

“She’s one of a kind,” Alice agreed in a dry voice.

"And Alice . . ." Charlie hesitated. "Now, you know how fond I am of you, and I can tell that she's happy to see you, but…I'm a little worried about what your visit will do to her."

"So am I, Charlie, so am I. I wouldn't have come if I'd had any idea. I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize, honey. Who knows? Maybe it will be good for her."

"I hope you're right."

There was a long break while forks scraped plates and Charlie chewed. I wondered where Alice was hiding the food.

"Alice, I have to ask you something," Charlie said awkwardly.

Alice was calm. "Go ahead."

"He's not coming back to visit, too, is he?" I could hear the suppressed anger in Charlie's voice.

Alice answered in a soft, reassuring tone. "He doesn't even know I'm here. The last time I spoke with him, he was in South America."

I stiffened as I heard this new information, and listened harder.

"That's something, at least." Charlie snorted. "Well, I hope he's enjoying himself."

For the first time, Alice's voice had a bit of steel in it. "I wouldn't make assumptions, Charlie." I knew how her eyes would flash when she used that tone.

A chair scooted from the table, scraping loudly across the floor. I pictured Charlie getting up; there was no way Alice would make that kind of noise. The faucet ran, splashing against a dish.

It didn't sound like they were going to say anything more about Edward, so I decided it was time to wake up.

I turned over, bouncing against the springs to make them squeak. Then I yawned loudly.

All was quiet in the kitchen.

I stretched and groaned.

"Alice?" I asked innocently; the soreness rasping in my throat added nicely to the charade.

"I'm in the kitchen, Bella," Alice called, no hint in her voice that she suspected my eavesdropping. But she was good at hiding things like that.

Charlie had to leave then—he was helping Sue Clearwater with the funeral arrangements. It would have been a very long day without Alice. She never spoke about leaving, and I didn't ask her. I knew it was inevitable, but I put it out of my mind.

Instead, we talked about her family—all but one.

Carlisle was working nights in Ithaca and teaching part time at Cornell. Esme was restoring a seventeenth century house, a historical monument, in the forest north of the city. Emmett and Rosalie had gone to Europe for a few months on another honeymoon, but they were back now. Jasper was at Cornell, too, studying philosophy this time. And Alice had been doing some personal research, concerning

the information I'd accidentally uncovered for her last spring. She'd successfully tracked down the asylum where she'd spent the last years of her human life. The life she had no memory of.

"My name was Mary Alice Brandon," she told me quietly. "I had a little sister named Cynthia. Her daughter—my niece—is still alive in Biloxi."

"Did you find out why they put you in…that place?" What would drive parents to that extreme? Even if their daughter saw visions of the future….

She just shook her head, her topaz eyes thoughtful. "I couldn't find much about them. I went through all the old newspapers on microfiche. My family wasn't mentioned often; they weren't part of the social circle that made the papers. My parents' engagement was there, and Cynthia's." The name fell uncertainly from her tongue. "My birth was announced…and my death. I found my grave. I also filched my admissions sheet from the old asylum archives. The date on the admission and the date on my tombstone are the same."

I didn't know what to say, and, after a short pause, Alice moved on to lighter topics.

The Cullens were reassembled now, with the one exception, spending Cornell's spring break in Denali with Tanya and her family. I listened too eagerly to even the most trivial news. She never mentioned the one I was most interested in, and for that I was grateful. It was enough to listen to the stories of the family I'd once dreamed of belonging to.

Charlie didn't get back until after dark, and he looked more worn than he had the night before. He would be headed back to the reservation first thing in the

morning for Harry's funeral, so he turned in early. I stayed on the couch with Alice again.

Charlie was almost a stranger when he came down the stairs before the sun was up, wearing an old suit I'd never seen him in before. The jacket hung open; I guessed it was too tight to fasten the buttons. His tie was a bit wide for the current style. He tiptoed to the door, trying not to wake us up. I let him go, pretending to sleep, as Alice did on the recliner.

As soon as he was out the door, Alice sat up. Under the quilt, she was fully dressed.

"So, what are we doing today?" she asked.

"I don't know—do you see anything interesting happening?"

She smiled and shook her head. "But it's still early."

All the time I'd been spending in La Push meant a pile of things I'd been neglecting at home, and I decided to catch up on my chores. I wanted to do something, anything that might make life easier for Charlie—maybe it would make him feel just a little better to come home to a clean, organized house. I started with the bathroom—it showed the most signs of neglect.

While I worked, Alice leaned against the doorjamb and asked nonchalant questions about my, well, our high school friends and what they been up to since she'd left. Her face stayed casual and emotionless, but I sensed her disapproval when she realized how little I could tell her. Or maybe I just had a guilty conscience after eavesdropping on her conversation with Charlie yesterday morning.

I was literally up to my elbows in Comet, scrubbing the floor of the bathtub, when the doorbell rang.

I looked to Alice at once, and her expression was perplexed, almost worried, which was strange; Alice was never taken by surprise.

“Hold on!” I shouted in the general direction of the front door, getting up and hurrying to the sink to rinse my arms off.

“Bella,” Alice said with a trace of frustration in her voice, “I have a fairly good guess who that might be, and I think I’d better step out.”

“Guess?” I echoed. Since when did Alice have to guess anything?

“If this is a repeat of my egregious lapse in foresight yesterday, then it’s most likely Jacob Black or one of his…friends.”

I stared at her, putting it together. “You can’t see werewolves?”

She grimaced. “So it would seem.” She was obviously annoyed by this fact—very annoyed.

The doorbell rang again—buzzing twice quickly and impatiently.

“You don’t have go anywhere, Alice. You were here first.”

She laughed her silvery little laugh—it had a dark edge. “Trust me—it wouldn’t be a good idea to have me and Jacob Black in a room together.”

She kissed my cheek swiftly before she vanished through Charlie's door—and out his back window, no doubt.

The doorbell rang again.

# Chapter 18

## THE FUNERAL

I sprinted down the stairs and threw the door open.

It was Jacob, of course. Even blind, Alice wasn't slow.

He was standing about six feet back from the door, his nose wrinkled in distaste, but his face otherwise smooth—masklike. He didn't fool me; I could see the faint trembling of his hands.

Hostility rolled off of him in waves. It brought back that awful afternoon when he'd chosen Sam over me, and I felt my chin jerk up defensively in response.

Jacob's Rabbit idled by the curb with Jared behind the wheel and Embry in the passenger seat. I understood what this meant: they were afraid to let him come here alone. It made me sad, and a little annoyed. The Cullens weren't like that.

"Hey," I finally said when he didn't speak.

Jake pursed his lips, still hanging back from the door. His eyes flickered across the front of the house.

I ground my teeth. "She's not here. Do you need something?"

He hesitated. "You're alone?"

"Yes." I sighed.

"Can I talk to you a minute?"

"Of course you can, Jacob. Come on in."

Jacob glanced over his shoulder at his friends in the car. I saw Embry shake his head just a tiny bit. For some reason, this bugged me to no end.

My teeth clenched together again. “Chicken,” I mumbled under my breath.

Jake’s eyes flashed back to me, his thick, black brows pushing into a furious angle over his deep-set eyes. His jaw set, and he marched—there was no other way to describe the way he moved—up the sidewalk and shrugged past me into the house.

I locked gazes with first Jared and then Embry—I didn’t like the hard way they eyed me; did they really think I would let anything hurt Jacob?—before I shut the door on them.

Jacob was in the hall behind me, staring at the mess of blankets in the living room.

“Slumber party?” he asked, his tone sarcastic.

“Yeah,” I answered with the same level of acid. I didn’t like Jacob when he acted this way. “What’s it to you?”

He wrinkled his nose again like he smelled something unpleasant. “Where’s your ‘friend’?” I could hear the quotation marks in his tone.

“She had some errands to run. Look, Jacob, what do you want?”

Something about the room seemed to make him edgier—his long arms were quivering. He didn’t answer my question. Instead he moved on to the kitchen, his restless eyes darting everywhere.

I followed him. He paced back and forth along the short counter.

“Hey,” I said, putting myself in his way. He stopped pacing and stared down at me. “What’s your problem?”

“I don’t like having to be here.”

That stung. I winced, and his eyes tightened.

“Then I’m sorry you had to come,” I muttered. “Why don’t you tell me what you need so you can leave?”

“I just have to ask you a couple of questions. It shouldn’t take long. We have to get back for the funeral.”

“Okay. Get it over with then.” I was probably overdoing it with the antagonism, but I didn’t want him to see how much this hurt. I knew I wasn’t being fair. After all, I’d picked the bloodsucker over him last night. I’d hurt him first.

He took a deep breath, and his trembling fingers were suddenly still. His face smoothed into a serene mask.

“One of the Cullens is staying here with you,” he stated.

“Yes. Alice Cullen.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “How long is she here for?”

“As long as she wants to be.” The belligerence was still there in my tone. “It’s an open invitation.”

“Do you think you could…please…explain to her about the other one—Victoria?”

I paled. “I told her about that.”

He nodded. “You should know that we can only watch our own lands with a Cullen here. You’ll only be safe in La Push. I can’t protect you here anymore.”

“Okay,” I said in a small voice.

He looked away then, out the back windows. He didn’t continue.

“Is that all?”

He kept his eyes on the glass as he answered. “Just one more thing.”

I waited, but he didn’t continue. “Yes?” I finally prompted.

“Are the rest of them coming back now?” he asked in a cool, quiet voice. It reminded me of Sam’s always calm manner. Jacob was becoming more like Sam….I wondered why that bothered me so much.

Now I didn’t speak. He looked back at my face with probing eyes.

“Well?” he asked. He struggled to conceal the tension behind his serene expression.

“No.” I said finally. Grudgingly. “They aren’t coming back.”

His expression didn’t change. “Okay. That’s all.”

I glared at him, annoyance rekindled. “Well, run along now. Go tell Sam that the scary monsters aren’t coming to get you.”

“Okay,” he repeated, still calm.

That seemed to be it. Jacob walked swiftly from the kitchen. I waited to hear the front door open, but I heard nothing. I could hear the clock over the stove ticking, and I marveled again at how quiet he’d become.

What a disaster. How could I have alienated him so completely in such a short amount of time?

Would he forgive me when Alice was gone? What if he didn’t?

I slumped against the counter and buried my face in my hands. How had I made such a mess of everything? But what could I have done differently? Even in hindsight, I couldn’t think of any better way, any perfect course of action.

“Bella…?” Jacob asked in a troubled voice.

I pulled my face out of my hands to see Jacob hesitating in the kitchen doorway; he hadn’t left when I’d thought. It was only when I saw the clear drops sparkling in my hands that I realized I was crying.

Jacob’s calm expression was gone; his face was anxious and unsure. He walked quickly back to stand in front of me, ducking his head so that his eyes were closer to being on the same level with mine.

“Did it again, didn’t I?”

“Did what?” I asked, my voice cracking.

“Broke my promise. Sorry.”

“’S’okay,” I mumbled. “I started it this time.”

His face twisted. “I knew how you felt about them. It shouldn’t have taken me by surprise like that.”

I could see the revulsion in his eyes. I wanted to explain to him what Alice was really like, to defend her against the judgments he’d made, but something warned me that now was not the time.

So I just said, “Sorry,” again.

“Let’s not worry about it, okay? She’s just visiting, right? She’ll leave, and things will go back to normal.”

“Can’t I be friends with you both at the same time?” I asked, my voice not hiding an ounce of the hurt I felt.

He shook his head slowly. “No, I don’t think you can.”

I sniffed and stared at his big feet. “But you’ll wait, right? You’ll still be my friend, even though I love Alice, too?”

I didn’t look up, afraid to see what he’d think of that last part. It took him a minute to answer, so I was probably right not to look.

“Yeah, I’ll always be your friend,” he said gruffly. “No matter what you love.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

I felt his arms wind around me, and I leaned against his chest, still sniffling. “This sucks.”

“Yeah.” Then he sniffed my hair and said, “Ew.”

"What!" I demanded. I looked up to see that his nose was wrinkled again. "Why does everyone keep doing that to me? I don't smell!"

He smiled a little. "Yes, you do—you smell like them. Blech. Too sweet—sickly sweet. And…icy. It burns my nose."

"Really?" That was strange. Alice smelled unbelievably wonderful. To a human, anyway. "But why would Alice think I smelled, too, then?"

That wiped his smile away. "Huh. Maybe I don't smell so good to her, either. Huh."

"Well, you both smell fine to me." I rested my head against him again. I was going to miss him terribly when he walked out my door. It was a nasty catch-22—on the one hand, I wanted Alice to stay forever. I was going to die—metaphorically—when she left me. But how was I supposed to go without seeing Jake for any length of time? What a mess, I thought again.

"I'll miss you," Jacob whispered, echoing my thoughts. "Every minute. I hope she leaves soon."

"It really doesn't have to be that way, Jake."

He sighed. "Yes, it really does, Bella. You…love her. So I'd better not get anywhere near her. I'm not sure that I'm even-tempered enough to handle that. Sam would be mad if I broke the treaty, and"—his voice turned sarcastic—"you probably wouldn't like it too much if I killed your friend."

I recoiled from him when he said that, but he only tightened his arms, refusing to let me escape. "There's no point in avoiding the truth. That's the way things are, Bells."

“I do not like the way things are.”

Jacob freed one arm so that he could cup his big brown hand under my chin and make me look at him. “Yeah. It was easier when we were both human, wasn’t it?”

I sighed.

We stared at each other for a long moment. His hand smoldered against my skin. In my face, I knew there was nothing but wistful sadness—I didn’t want to have to say goodbye now, no matter for how short a time. At first his face reflected mine, but then, as neither of us looked away, his expression changed.

He released me, lifting his other hand to brush his fingertips along my cheek, trailing them down to my jaw. I could feel his fingers tremble—not with anger this time. He pressed his palm against my cheek, so that my face was trapped between his burning hands.

“Bella,” he whispered.

I was frozen.

No! I hadn’t made this decision yet. I didn’t know if I could do this, and now I was out of time to think. But I would have been a fool if I thought rejecting him now would have no consequences.

I stared back at him. He was not my Jacob, but he could be. His face was familiar and beloved. In so many real ways, I did love him. He was my comfort, my safe harbor. Right now, I could choose to have him belong to me.

Alice was back for the moment, but that changed nothing. True love was forever lost. The prince was

never coming back to kiss me awake from my enchanted sleep. I was not a princess, after all. So what was the fairy-tale protocol for other kisses? The mundane kind that didn't break any spells?

Maybe it would be easy—like holding his hand or having his arms around me. Maybe it would feel nice. Maybe it wouldn't feel like a betrayal. Besides, who was I betraying, anyway? Just myself.

Keeping his eyes on mine, Jacob began to bend his face toward me. And I was still absolutely undecided.

The shrill ring of the phone made us both jump, but it did not break his focus. He took his hand from under my chin and reached over me to grab the receiver, but still held my face securely with the hand against my cheek. His dark eyes did not free mine. I was too muddled to react, even to take advantage of the distraction.

"Swan residence," Jacob said, his husky voice low and intense.

Someone answered, and Jacob altered in an instant. He straightened up, and his hand dropped from my face. His eyes went flat, his face blank, and I would have bet the measly remainder of my college fund that it was Alice.

I recovered myself and held out my hand for the phone. Jacob ignored me.

"He's not here," Jacob said, and the words were menacing.

There was some very short reply, a request for more information it seemed, because he added unwillingly, "He's at the funeral."

Then Jacob hung up the phone. “Filthy bloodsucker,” he muttered under his breath. The face he turned back to me was the bitter mask again.

“Who did you just hang up on?” I gasped, infuriated. “In my house, and on my phone?”

“Easy! He hung up on me!”

“He? Who was it?!”

He sneered the title. “Dr. Carlisle Cullen.”

“Why didn’t you let me talk to him?!”

“He didn’t ask for you,” Jacob said coldly. His face was smooth, expressionless, but his hands shook. “He asked where Charlie was and I told him. I don’t think I broke any rules of etiquette.”

“You listen to me, Jacob Black—”

But he obviously wasn’t listening. He looked quickly over his shoulder, as if someone had called his name from the other room. His eyes went wide and his body stiff, then he started trembling. I listened too, automatically, but heard nothing.

“Bye, Bells,” he spit out, and wheeled toward the front door.

I ran after him. “What is it?”

And then I ran into him, as he rocked back on his heels, cussing under his breath. He spun around again, knocking me sideways. I bobbled and fell to the floor, my legs tangled with his.

"Shoot, ow!" I protested as he hurriedly jerked his legs free one at a time.

I struggled to pull myself up as he darted for the back door; he suddenly froze again.

Alice stood motionless at the foot of the stairs.

"Bella," she choked.

I scrambled to my feet and lurched to her side. Her eyes were dazed and far away, her face drawn and whiter than bone. Her slim body trembled to an inner turmoil.

"Alice, what's wrong?" I cried. I put my hands on her face, trying to calm her.

Her eyes focused on mine abruptly, wide with pain.

"Edward," was all she whispered.

My body reacted faster than my mind was able to catch up with the implications of her reply. I didn't at first understand why the room was spinning or where the hollow roar in my ears was coming from. My mind labored, unable to make sense of Alice's bleak face and how it could possibly relate to Edward, while my body was already swaying, seeking the relief of unconsciousness before the reality could hit me.

The stairway tilted at the oddest angle.

Jacob's furious voice was suddenly in my ear, hissing out a stream of profanities. I felt a vague disapproval. His new friends were clearly a bad influence.

I was on the couch without understanding how I got there, and Jacob was still swearing. It felt like there

was an earthquake—the couch was shaking under me.

“What did you do to her?” he demanded.

Alice ignored him. “Bella? Bella, snap out of it. We have to hurry.”

“Stay back,” Jacob warned.

“Calm down, Jacob Black,” Alice ordered. “You don’t want to do that so close to her.”

“I don’t think I’ll have any problem keeping my focus,” he retorted, but his voice sounded a little cooler.

“Alice?” My voice was weak. “What happened?” I asked, even though I didn’t want to hear.

“I don’t know,” she suddenly wailed. “What is he thinking?!”

I labored to pull myself up despite the dizziness. I realized it was Jacob’s arm I was gripping for balance. He was the one shaking, not the couch.

Alice was pulling a small silver phone from her bag when my eyes relocated her. Her fingers dialed the numbers so fast they were a blur.

“Rose, I need to talk to Carlisle now.” Her voice whipped through the words. “Fine, as soon as he’s back. No, I’ll be on a plane. Look, have you heard anything from Edward?”

Alice paused now, listening with an expression that grew more appalled every second. Her mouth opened into a little O of horror, and the phone shook in her hand.

“Why?” she gasped. “Why would you do that, Rosalie?”

Whatever the answer was, it made her jaw tighten in anger. Her eyes flashed and narrowed.

“Well, you’re wrong on both counts, though, Rosalie, so that would be a problem, don’t you think?” she asked acidly. “Yes, that’s right. She’s absolutely fine—I was wrong….It’s a long story….But you’re wrong about that part, too, that’s why I’m calling….Yes, that’s exactly what I saw.”

Alice’s voice was very hard and her lips were pulled back from her teeth. “It’s a bit late for that, Rose. Save your remorse for someone who believes it.” Alice snapped the phone shut with a sharp twist of her fingers.

Her eyes were tortured as she turned to face me.

“Alice,” I blurted out quickly. I couldn’t let her speak yet. I needed a few more seconds before she spoke and her words destroyed what was left of my life. “Alice, Carlisle is back, though. He called just before….”

She stared at me blankly. “How long ago?” she asked in a hollow voice.

“Half a minute before you showed up.”

“What did he say?” She really focused now, waiting for my answer.

“I didn’t talk to him.” My eyes flickered to Jacob.

Alice turned her penetrating gaze on him. He flinched, but held his place next to me. He sat awkwardly, almost as if he were trying to shield me with his body.

“He asked for Charlie, and I told him Charlie wasn’t here,” Jacob muttered resentfully.

“Is that everything?” Alice demanded, her voice like ice.

“Then he hung up on me,” Jacob spit back. A tremor rolled down his spine, shaking me with it.

“You told him Charlie was at the funeral,” I reminded him.

Alice jerked her head back toward me. “What were his exact words?”

“He said, ‘He’s not here,’ and when Carlisle asked where Charlie was, Jacob said, ‘At the funeral.’”

Alice moaned and sank to her knees.

“Tell me Alice,” I whispered.

“That wasn’t Carlisle on the phone,” she said hopelessly.

“Are you calling me a liar?” Jacob snarled from beside me.

Alice ignored him, focusing on my bewildered face.

“It was Edward.” The words were just a choked whisper. “He thinks you’re dead.”

My mind started to work again. These words weren't the ones I'd been afraid of, and the relief cleared my head.

"Rosalie told him I killed myself, didn't she?" I said, sighing as I relaxed.

"Yes," Alice admitted, her eyes flashing hard again. "In her defense, she did believe it. They rely on my sight far too much for something that works so imperfectly. But for her to track him down to tell him this! Didn't she realize…or care…?" Her voice faded away in horror.

"And when Edward called here, he thought Jacob meant my funeral," I realized. It stung to know how close I'd been, just inches away from his voice. My nails dug into Jacob's arm, but he didn't flinch.

Alice looked at me strangely. "You're not upset," she whispered.

"Well, it's really rotten timing, but it will all get straightened out. The next time he calls, someone will tell him…what…really . . ." I trailed off. Her gaze strangled the words in my throat.

Why was she so panicked? Why was her face twisting now with pity and horror? What was it she had said to Rosalie on the phone just now? Something about what she'd seen…and Rosalie's remorse; Rosalie would never feel remorse for anything that happened to me. But if she'd hurt her family, hurt her brother…

"Bella," Alice whispered. "Edward won't call again. He believed her."

"I. Don't. Understand." My mouth framed each word in silence. I couldn't push the air out to actually say

the words that would make her explain what that meant.

“He’s going to Italy.”

It took the length of one heartbeat for me to comprehend.

When Edward’s voice came back to me now, it was not the perfect imitation of my delusions. It was just the weak, flat tone of my memories. But the words alone were enough to shred through my chest and leave it gaping open. Words from a time when I would have bet everything that I owned or could borrow on that fact that he loved me.

*Well, I wasn’t going to live without you,* he’d said as we watched Romeo and Juliet die, here in this very room. *But I wasn’t sure how to do it….I knew Emmett and Jasper would never help….so I was thinking maybe I would go to Italy and do something to provoke the Volturi….You don’t irritate them. Not unless you want to die.*

*Not unless you want to die.*

“NO!” The half-shrieked denial was so loud after the whispered words, it made us all jump. I felt the blood rushing to my face as I realized what she’d seen. “No! No, no, no! He can’t! He can’t do that!”

“He made up his mind as soon as your friend confirmed that it was too late to save you.”

“But he…he left! He didn’t want me anymore! What difference does it make now? He knew I would die sometime!”

"I don't think he ever planned to outlive you by long," Alice said quietly.

"How dare he!" I screamed. I was on my feet now, and Jacob rose uncertainly to put himself between Alice and me again.

"Oh, get out of the way, Jacob!" I elbowed my way around his trembling body with desperate impatience. "What do we do?" I begged Alice. There had to be something. "Can't we call him? Can Carlisle?"

She was shaking her head. "That was the first thing I tried. He left his phone in a trash can in Rio—someone answered it…," she whispered.

"You said before we had to hurry. Hurry how? Let's do it, whatever it is!"

"Bella, I—I don't think I can ask you to . . ." She trailed off in indecision.

"Ask me!" I commanded.

She put her hands on my shoulders, holding me in place, her fingers flexing sporadically to emphasize her words. "We may already be too late. I saw him going to the Volturi…and asking to die." We both cringed, and my eyes were suddenly blind. I blinked feverishly at the tears. "It all depends on what they choose. I can't see that till they make a decision.

"But if they say no, and they might—Aro is fond of Carlisle, and wouldn't want to offend him—Edward has a backup plan. They're very protective of their city. If Edward does something to upset the peace, he thinks they'll act to stop him. And he's right. They will."

I stared at her with my jaw clenched in frustration. I'd heard nothing yet that would explain why we were still standing here.

"So if they agree to grant his favor, we're too late. If they say no, and he comes up with a plan to offend them quickly enough, we're too late. If he gives into his more theatrical tendencies…we might have time."

"Let's go!"

"Listen, Bella! Whether we are in time or not, we will be in the heart of the Volturi city. I will be considered his accomplice if he is successful. You will be a human who not only knows too much, but also smells too good. There's a very good chance that they will eliminate us all—though in your case it won't be punishment so much as dinnertime."

"This is what's keeping us here?" I asked in disbelief. "I'll go alone if you're afraid." I mentally tabulated what money was left in my account, and wondered if Alice would lend me the rest.

"I'm only afraid of getting you killed."

I snorted in disgust. "I almost get myself killed on a daily basis! Tell me what I need to do!"

"You write a note to Charlie. I'll call the airlines."

"Charlie," I gasped.

Not that my presence was protecting him, but could I leave him here alone to face…

"I'm not going to let anything happen to Charlie." Jacob's low voice was gruff and angry. "Screw the treaty."

I glanced up at him, and he scowled at my panicked expression.

“Hurry, Bella,” Alice interrupted urgently.

I ran to the kitchen, yanking the drawers open and throwing the contents all over the floor as I searched for a pen. A smooth, brown hand held one out to me.

“Thanks,” I mumbled, pulling the cap off with my teeth. He silently handed me the pad of paper we wrote phone messages on. I tore off the top sheet and threw it over my shoulder.

Dad, I wrote.

*I'm with Alice. Edward's in trouble. You can ground me when I get back. I know it's a bad time. Sorry. Love you so much.*

*Bella*

“Don’t go,” Jacob whispered. The anger was all gone now that Alice was out of sight.

I wasn’t about to waste time arguing with him. “Please, please, please take care of Charlie,” I said as I dashed back out to the front room. Alice was waiting in the doorway with a bag over her shoulder.

“Get your wallet—you’ll need ID. Please tell me you have a passport. I don’t have time to forge one.”

I nodded and then raced up the stairs, my knees weak with gratitude that my mother had wanted to marry Phil on a beach in Mexico. Of course, like all

her plans, it had fallen through. But not before I'd made all the practical arrangements I could for her.

I tore through my room. I stuffed my old wallet, a clean T-shirt, and sweatpants into my backpack, and then threw my toothbrush on top. I hurled myself back down the stairs. The sense of déjà vu was nearly stifling by this point. At least, unlike the last time—when I'd run away from Forks to escape thirsty vampires rather than to find them—I wouldn't have to say goodbye to Charlie in person.

Jacob and Alice were locked in some kind of confrontation in front of the open door, standing so far apart you wouldn't assume at first that they were having a conversation. Neither one seemed to notice my noisy reappearance.

"You might control yourself on occasion, but these leeches you're taking her to—" Jacob was furiously accusing her.

"Yes. You're right, dog." Alice was snarling, too. "The Volturi are the very essence of our kind—they're the reason your hair stands on end when you smell me. They are the substance of your nightmares, the dread behind your instincts. I'm not unaware of that."

"And you take her to them like a bottle of wine for a party!" he shouted.

"You think she'd be better off if I left her here alone, with Victoria stalking her?"

"We can handle the redhead."

"Then why is she still hunting?"

Jacob growled, and a shudder rippled through his torso.

"Stop that!" I shouted at them both, wild with impatience. "Argue when we get back, let's go!"

Alice turned for the car, disappearing in her haste. I hurried after her, pausing automatically to turn and lock the door.

Jacob caught my arm with a shivering hand. "Please, Bella. I'm begging."

His dark eyes were glistening with tears. A lump filled my throat.

"Jake, I have to—"

"You don't, though. You really don't. You could stay here with me. You could stay alive. For Charlie. For me."

The engine of Carlisle's Mercedes purred; the rhythm of the thrumming spiked when Alice revved it impatiently.

I shook my head, tears spattering from my eyes with the sharp motion. I pulled my arm free, and he didn't fight me.

"Don't die, Bella," he choked out. "Don't go. Don't."

What if I never saw him again?

The thought pushed me past the silent tears; a sob broke out from my chest. I threw my arms around his waist and hugged for one too-short moment, burying my tear-wet face against his chest. He put his big hand on the back of my hair, as if to hold me there.

"Bye, Jake." I pulled his hand from my hair, and kissed his palm. I couldn't bear to look at his face. "Sorry," I whispered.

Then I spun and raced for the car. The door on the passenger side was open and waiting. I threw my backpack over the headrest and slid in, slamming the door behind me.

"Take care of Charlie!" I turned to shout out the window, but Jacob was nowhere in sight. As Alice stomped on the gas and—with the tires screeching like human screams—spun us around to face the road, I caught sight of a shred of white near the edge of the trees. A piece of a shoe.

# Chapter 19

## RACE

We made our flight with seconds to spare, and then the true torture began. The plane sat idle on the tarmac while the flight attendants strolled—so casually—up and down the aisle, patting the bags in the overhead compartments to make sure everything fit. The pilots leaned out of the cockpit, chatting with them as they passed. Alice's hand was hard on my shoulder, holding me in my seat while I bounced anxiously up and down.

"It's faster than running," she reminded me in a low voice.

I just nodded in time with my bouncing.

At last the plane rolled lazily from the gate, building speed with a gradual steadiness that tortured me further. I expected some kind of relief when we achieved liftoff, but my frenzied impatience didn't lessen.

Alice lifted the phone on the back of the seat in front of her before we'd stopped climbing, turning her back on the stewardess who eyed her with disapproval. Something about my expression stopped the stewardess from coming over to protest.

I tried to tune out what Alice was murmuring to Jasper; I didn't want to hear the words again, but some slipped through.

"I can't be sure, I keep seeing him do different things, he keeps changing his mind….A killing spree through the city, attacking the guard, lifting a car over his

head in the main square…mostly things that would expose them—he knows that's the fastest way to force a reaction….

"No, you can't." Alice's voice dropped till it was nearly inaudible, though I was sitting inches from her. Contrarily, I listened harder. "Tell Emmett no….Well, go after Emmett and Rosalie and bring them back….Think about it, Jasper. If he sees any of us, what do you think he will do?"

She nodded. "Exactly. I think Bella is the only chance—if there is a chance….I'll do everything that can be done, but prepare Carlisle; the odds aren't good."

She laughed then, and there was a catch in her voice. "I've thought of that….Yes, I promise." Her voice became pleading. "Don't follow me. I promise, Jasper. One way or another, I'll get out….And I love you."

She hung up, and leaned back in her seat with her eyes closed. "I hate lying to him."

"Tell me everything, Alice," I begged. "I don't understand. Why did you tell Jasper to stop Emmett, why can't they come help us?"

"Two reasons," she whispered, her eyes still closed. "The first I told him. We could try to stop Edward ourselves—if Emmett could get his hands on him, we might be able to stop him long enough to convince him you're alive. But we can't sneak up on Edward. And if he sees us coming for him, he'll just act that much faster. He'll throw a Buick through a wall or something, and the Volturi will take him down.

"That's the second reason of course, the reason I couldn't say to Jasper. Because if they're there and

the Volturi kill Edward, they'll fight them. Bella." She opened her eyes and stared at me, beseeching. "If there were any chance we could win…if there were a way that the four of us could save my brother by fighting for him, maybe it would be different. But we can't, and, Bella, I can't lose Jasper like that."

I realized why her eyes begged for my understanding. She was protecting Jasper, at our expense, and maybe at Edward's, too. I understood, and I did not think badly of her. I nodded.

"Couldn't Edward hear you, though?" I asked. "Wouldn't he know, as soon as he heard your thoughts, that I was alive, that there was no point to this?"

Not that there was any justification, either way. I still couldn't believe that he was capable of reacting like this.It made no sense! I remembered with painful clarity his words that day on the sofa, while we watched Romeo and Juliet kill themselves, one after the other. I wasn't going to live without you, he'd said, as if it should be such an obvious conclusion. But the words he had spoken in the forest as he'd left me had canceled all that out—forcefully.

"If he were listening," she explained. "But believe it or not, it's possible to lie with your thoughts. If you had died, I would still try to stop him. And I would be thinking 'she's alive, she's alive' as hard as I could. He knows that."

I ground my teeth in mute frustration.

"If there were any way to do this without you, Bella, I wouldn't be endangering you like this. It's very wrong of me."

“Don’t be stupid. I’m the last thing you should be worrying about.” I shook my head impatiently. “Tell me what you meant, about hating to lie to Jasper.”

She smiled a grim smile. “I promised him I would get out before they killed me, too. It’s not something I can guarantee—not by a long shot.” She raised her eyebrows, as if willing me to take the danger more seriously.

“Who are these Volturi?” I demanded in a whisper. “What makes them so much more dangerous than Emmett, Jasper, Rosalie, and you?” It was hard to imagine something scarier than that.

She took a deep breath, and then abruptly leveled a dark glance over my shoulder. I turned in time to see the man in the aisle seat looking away as if he wasn’t listening to us. He appeared to be a businessman, in a dark suit with a power tie and a laptop on his knees. While I stared at him with irritation, he opened the computer and very conspicuously put headphones on.

I leaned closer to Alice. Her lips were at my ears as she breathed the story.

“I was surprised that you recognized the name,” she said. “That you understood so immediately what it meant—when I said he was going to Italy. I thought I would have to explain. How much did Edward tell you?”

“He just said they were an old, powerful family—like royalty. That you didn’t antagonize them unless you wanted to…die,” I whispered. The last word was hard to choke out.

“You have to understand,” she said, her voice slower, more measured now. “We Cullens are unique in more ways than you know. It’s…abnormal for so many of us to live together in peace. It’s the same for Tanya’s family in the north, and Carlisle speculates that abstaining makes it easier for us to be civilized, to form bonds based on love rather than survival or convenience. Even James’s little coven of three was unusually large—and you saw how easily Laurent left them. Our kind travel alone, or in pairs, as a general rule. Carlisle’s family is the biggest in existence, as far as I know, with the one exception. The Volturi.

“There were three of them originally, Aro, Caius, and Marcus.”

“I’ve seen them,” I mumbled. “In the picture in Carlisle’s study.”

Alice nodded. “Two females joined them over time, and the five of them make up the family. I’m not sure, but I suspect that their age is what gives them the ability to live peacefully together. They are well over three thousand years old. Or maybe it’s their gifts that give them extra tolerance. Like Edward and I, Aro and Marcus are . . .talented.”

She continued before I could ask. “Or maybe it’s just their love of power that binds them together. Royalty is an apt description.”

“But if there are only five—”

“Five that make up the family,” she corrected. “That doesn’t include their guard.”

I took a deep breath. “That sounds…serious.”

“Oh, it is,” she assured me. “There were nine members of the guard that were permanent, the last time we heard. Others are more…transitory. It changes. And many of them are gifted as well—with formidable gifts, gifts that make what I can do look like a parlor trick. The Volturi chose them for their abilities, physical or otherwise.”

I opened my mouth, and then closed it. I didn’t think I wanted to know how bad the odds were.

She nodded again, as if she understood exactly what I was thinking. “They don’t get into too many confrontations. No one is stupid enough to mess with them. They stay in their city, leaving only as duty calls.”

“Duty?” I wondered.

“Didn’t Edward tell you what they do?”

“No,” I said, feeling the blank expression on my face.

Alice looked over my head again, toward the businessman, and put her wintry lips back to my ear.

“There’s a reason he called them royalty…the ruling class. Over the millennia, they have assumed the position of enforcing our rules—which actually translates to punishing transgressors. They fulfill that duty decisively.”

My eyes popped wide with shock. “There are rules?” I asked in a voice that was too loud.

“Shh!”

“Shouldn’t somebody have mentioned this to me earlier?” I whispered angrily. “I mean, I wanted to be

a…to be one of you! Shouldn't somebody have explained the rules to me?"

Alice chuckled once at my reaction. "It's not that complicated, Bella. There's only one core restriction—and if you think about it, you can probably figure it out for yourself."

I thought about it. "Nope, I have no idea."

She shook her head, disappointed. "Maybe it's too obvious. We just have to keep our existence a secret."

"Oh," I mumbled. It was obvious.

"It makes sense, and most of us don't need policing," she continued. "But, after a few centuries, sometimes one of us gets bored. Or crazy. I don't know. And then the Volturi step in before it can compromise them, or the rest of us."

"So Edward . . ."

"Is planning to flout that in their own city—the city they've secretly held for three thousand years, since the time of the Etruscans. They are so protective of their city that they don't allow hunting within its walls. Volterra is probably the safest city in the world—from vampire attack at the very least."

"But you said they didn't leave. How do they eat?"

"They don't leave. They bring in their food from the outside, from quite far away sometimes. It gives their guard something to do when they're not out annihilating mavericks. Or protecting Volterra from exposure . . ."

"From situations like this one, like Edward," I finished her sentence. It was amazingly easy to say his name now. I wasn't sure what the difference was. Maybe because I wasn't really planning on living much longer without seeing him. Or at all, if we were too late. It was comforting to know that I would have an easy out.

"I doubt they've ever had a situation quite like this," she muttered, disgusted. "You don't get a lot of suicidal vampires."

The sound that escaped out of my mouth was very quiet, but Alice seemed to understand that it was a cry of pain. She wrapped her thin, strong arm around my shoulders.

"We'll do what we can, Bella. It's not over yet."

"Not yet." I let her comfort me, though I knew she thought our chances were poor. "And the Volturi will get us if we mess up."

Alice stiffened. "You say that like it's a good thing."

I shrugged.

"Knock it off, Bella, or we're turning around in New York and going back to Forks."

"What?"

"You know what. If we're too late for Edward, I'm going to do my damnedest to get you back to Charlie, and I don't want any trouble from you. Do you understand that?"

"Sure, Alice."

She pulled back slightly so that she could glare at me. “No trouble.”

“Scout’s honor,” I muttered.

She rolled her eyes.

“Let me concentrate, now. I’m trying to see what he’s planning.”

She left her arm around me, but let her head fall back against the seat and closed her eyes. She pressed her free hand to the side of her face, rubbing her fingertips against her temple.

I watched her in fascination for a long time. Eventually, she became utterly motionless, her face like a stone sculpture. The minutes passed, and if I didn’t know better, I would have thought she’d fallen asleep. I didn’t dare interrupt her to ask what was going on.

I wished there was something safe for me to think about. I couldn’t allow myself to consider the horrors we were headed toward, or, more horrific yet, the chance that we might fail—not if I wanted to keep from screaming aloud.

I couldn’t anticipate anything, either. Maybe, if I were very, very, very lucky, I would somehow be able to save Edward. But I wasn’t so stupid as to think that saving him would mean that I could stay with him. I was no different, no more special than I’d been before. There would be no new reason for him to want me now. Seeing him and losing him again…

I fought back against the pain. This was the price I had to pay to save his life. I would pay it.

They showed a movie, and my neighbor got headphones. Sometimes I watched the figures moving across the little screen, but I couldn't even tell if the movie was supposed to be a romance or a horror film.

After an eternity, the plane began to descend toward New York City. Alice remained in her trance. I dithered, reaching out to touch her, only to pull my hand back again. This happened a dozen times before the plane touched town with a jarring impact.

"Alice," I finally said. "Alice, we have to go."

I touched her arm.

Her eyes came open very slowly. She shook her head from side to side for a moment.

"Anything new?" I asked in a low voice, conscious of the man listening on the other side of me.

"Not exactly," she breathed in a voice I could barely catch. "He's getting closer. He's deciding how he's going to ask."

We had to run for our connection, but that was good—better than having to wait. As soon as the plane was in the air, Alice closed her eyes and slid back into the same stupor as before. I waited as patiently as I could. When it was dark again, I opened the window to stare out into the flat black that was no better than the window shade.

I was grateful that I'd had so many months' practice with controlling my thoughts. Instead of dwelling on the terrifying possibilities that, no matter what Alice said, I did not intend to survive, I concentrated on lesser problems. Like, what I was going to say to Charlie if I got back? That was a thorny enough

problem to occupy several hours. And Jacob? He'd promised to wait for me, but did that promise still apply? Would I end up home alone in Forks, with no one at all? Maybe I didn't want to survive, no matter what happened.

It felt like seconds later when Alice shook my shoulder—I hadn't realized I'd fallen asleep.

"Bella," she hissed, her voice a little too loud in the darkened cabin full of sleeping humans.

I wasn't disoriented—I hadn't been out long enough for that.

"What's wrong?"

Alice's eyes gleamed in the dim light of a reading lamp in the row behind us.

"It's not wrong." She smiled fiercely. "It's right. They're deliberating, but they've decided to tell him no."

"The Volturi?" I muttered, groggy.

"Of course, Bella, keep up. I can see what they're going to say."

"Tell me."

An attendant tiptoed down the aisle to us. "Can I get you ladies a pillow?" His hushed whisper was a rebuke to our comparatively loud conversation.

"No, thank you." Alice beamed at up at him, her smile shockingly lovely. The attendant's expression was dazed as he turned and stumbled his way back.

"Tell me," I breathed almost silently.

She whispered into my ear. “They’re interested in him—they think his talent could be useful. They’re going to offer him a place with them.”

“What will he say?”

“I can’t see that yet, but I’ll bet it’s colorful.” She grinned again. “This is the first good news—the first break. They’re intrigued; they truly don’t want to destroy him—‘wasteful,’ that’s the word Aro will use—and that may be enough to force him to get creative. The longer he spends on his plans, the better for us.”

It wasn’t enough to make me hopeful, to make me feel the relief she obviously felt. There were still so many ways that we could be too late. And if I didn’t get through the walls into the Volturi city, I wouldn’t be able to stop Alice from dragging me back home.

“Alice?”

“What?”

“I’m confused. How are you seeing this so clearly? And then other times, you see things far away—things that don’t happen?”

Her eyes tightened. I wondered if she guessed what I was thinking of.

“It’s clear because it’s immediate and close, and I’m really concentrating. The faraway things that come on their own—those are just glimpses, faint maybes. Plus, I see my kind more easily than yours. Edward is even easier because I’m so attuned to him.”

“You see me sometimes,” I reminded her.

She shook her head. “Not as clearly.”

I sighed. “I really wish you could have been right about me. In the beginning, when you first saw things about me, before we even met . . .”

“What do you mean?”

“You saw me become one of you.” I barely mouthed the words.

She sighed. “It was a possibility at the time.”

“At the time,” I repeated.

“Actually, Bella . . .” She hesitated, and then seemed to make a choice. “Honestly, I think it’s all gotten beyond ridiculous. I’m debating whether to just change you myself.”

I stared at her, frozen with shock. Instantly, my mind resisted her words. I couldn’t afford that kind of hope if she changed her mind.

“Did I scare you?” she wondered. “I thought that’s what you wanted.”

“I do!” I gasped. “Oh, Alice, do it now! I could help you so much—and I wouldn’t slow you down. Bite me!”

“Shh,” she cautioned. The attendant was looking in our direction again. “Try to be reasonable,” she whispered. “We don’t have enough time. We have to get into Volterra tomorrow. You’d be writhing in pain for days.” She made a face. “And I don’t think the other passengers would react well.”

I bit my lip. “If you don’t do it now, you’ll change your mind.”

"No." She frowned, her expression unhappy. "I don't think I will. He'll be furious, but what will he be able to do about it?"

My heart beat faster. "Nothing at all."

She laughed quietly, and then sighed. "You have too much faith in me, Bella. I'm not sure that I can. I'll probably just end up killing you."

"I'll take my chances."

"You are so bizarre, even for a human."

"Thanks."

"Oh well, this is purely hypothetical at this point, anyway. First we have to live through tomorrow."

"Good point." But at least I had something to hope for if we did. If Alice made good on her promise—and if she didn't kill me—then Edward could run after his distractions all he wanted, and I could follow. I wouldn't let him be distracted. Maybe, when I was beautiful and strong, he wouldn't want distractions.

"Go back to sleep," she encouraged me. "I'll wake you up when there's something new."

"Right," I grumbled, certain that sleep was a lost cause now. Alice pulled her legs up on the seat, wrapping her arms around them and leaning her forehead against her knees. She rocked back and forth as she concentrated.

I rested my head against the seat, watching her, and the next thing I knew, she was snapping the shade closed against the faint brightening in the eastern sky.

"What's happening?" I mumbled.

"They've told him no," she said quietly. I noticed at once that her enthusiasm was gone.

My voice choked in my throat with panic. "What's he going to do?"

"It was chaotic at first. I was only getting flickers, he was changing plans so quickly."

"What kinds of plans?" I pressed.

"There was a bad hour," she whispered. "He'd decided to go hunting."

She looked at me, seeing the incomprehension in my face.

"In the city," she explained. "It got very close. He changed his mind at the last minute."

"He wouldn't want to disappoint Carlisle," I mumbled. Not at the end.

"Probably," she agreed.

"Will there be enough time?" As I spoke, there was a shift in the cabin pressure. I could feel the plane angling downward.

"I'm hoping so—if he sticks to his latest decision, maybe."

"What is that?"

"He's going to keep it simple. He's just going to walk out into the sun."

Just walk out into the sun. That was all.

It would be enough. The image of Edward in the meadow—glowing, shimmering like his skin was made of a million diamond facets—was burned into my memory. No human who saw that would ever forget. The Volturi couldn't possibly allow it. Not if they wanted to keep their city inconspicuous.

I looked at the slight gray glow that shone through the opened windows. "We'll be too late," I whispered, my throat closing in panic.

She shook her head. "Right now, he's leaning toward the melodramatic. He wants the biggest audience possible, so he'll choose the main plaza, under the clock tower. The walls are high there. He'll wait till the sun is exactly overhead."

"So we have till noon?"

"If we're lucky. If he sticks with this decision."

The pilot came on over the intercom, announcing, first in French and then in English, our imminent landing. The seat belt lights dinged and flashed.

"How far is it from Florence to Volterra?"

"That depends on how fast you drive….Bella?"

"Yes?"

She eyed me speculatively. "How strongly are you opposed to grand theft auto?"

A bright yellow Porsche screamed to a stop a few feet in front of where I paced, the word TURBO scrawled

in silver cursive across its back. Everyone beside me on the crowded airport sidewalk stared.

“Hurry, Bella!” Alice shouted impatiently through the open passenger window.

I ran to the door and threw myself in, feeling as though I might as well be wearing a black stocking over my head.

“Sheesh, Alice,” I complained. “Could you pick a more conspicuous car to steal?”

The interior was black leather, and the windows were tinted dark. It felt safer inside, like nighttime.

Alice was already weaving, too fast, through the thick airport traffic—sliding through tiny spaces between the cars as I cringed and fumbled for my seat belt.

“The important question,” she corrected, “is whether I could have stolen a faster car, and I don’t think so. I got lucky.”

“I’m sure that will be very comforting at the roadblock.”

She trilled a laugh. “Trust me, Bella. If anyone sets up a roadblock, it will be behind us.” She hit the gas then, as if to prove her point.

I probably should have watched out the window as first the city of Florence and then the Tuscan landscape flashed past with blurring speed. This was my first trip anywhere, and maybe my last, too. But Alice’s driving frightened me, despite the fact that I knew I could trust her behind the wheel. And I was too tortured with anxiety to really see the hills or the walled towns that looked like castles in the distance.

"Do you see anything more?"

"There's something going on," Alice muttered. "Some kind of festival. The streets are full of people and red flags. What's the date today?"

I wasn't entirely sure. "The nineteenth, maybe?"

"Well, that's ironic. It's Saint Marcus Day."

"Which means?"

She chuckled darkly. "The city holds a celebration every year. As the legend goes, a Christian missionary, a Father Marcus—Marcus of the Volturi, in fact—drove all the vampires from Volterra fifteen hundred years ago. The story claims he was martyred in Romania, still trying to drive away the vampire scourge. Of course that's nonsense—he's never left the city. But that's where some of the superstitions about things like crosses and garlic come from. Father Marcus used them so successfully. And vampires don't trouble Volterra, so they must work." Her smile was sardonic. "It's become more of a celebration of the city, and recognition for the police force—after all, Volterra is an amazingly safe city. The police get the credit."

I was realizing what she meant when she'd said ironic. "They're not going to be very happy if Edward messes things up for them on St. Marcus Day, are they?"

She shook her head, her expression grim. "No. They'll act very quickly."

I looked away, fighting against my teeth as they tried to break through the skin of my lower lip. Bleeding was not the best idea right now.

The sun was terrifyingly high in the pale blue sky.

“He’s still planning on noon?” I checked.

“Yes. He’s decided to wait. And they’re waiting for him.”

“Tell me what I have to do.”

She kept her eyes on the winding road—the needle on the speedometer was touching the far right on the dial.

“You don’t have to do anything. He just has to see you before he moves into the light. And he has to see you before he sees me.”

“How are we going to work that?”

A small red car seemed to be racing backward as Alice zoomed around it.

“I’m going to get you as close as possible, and then you’re going to run in the direction I point you.”

I nodded.

“Try not to trip,” she added. “We don’t have time for a concussion today.”

I groaned. That would be just like me—ruin everything, destroy the world, in a moment of klutziness.

The sun continued to climb in the sky while Alice raced against it. It was too bright, and that had me panicking. Maybe he wouldn’t feel the need to wait for noon after all.

“There,” Alice said abruptly, pointing to the castle city atop the closest hill.

I stared at it, feeling the very first hint of a new kind of fear. Every minute since yesterday morning—it seemed like a week ago—when Alice had spoken his name at the foot of the stairs, there had been only one fear. And yet, now, as I stared at the ancient sienna walls and towers crowning the peak of the steep hill, I felt another, more selfish kind of dread thrill through me.

I supposed the city was very beautiful. It absolutely terrified me.

“Volterra,” Alice announced in a flat, icy voice.

# Chapter 20

## VOLTERRA

We began the steep climb, and the road grew congested. As we wound higher, the cars became too close together for Alice to weave insanely between them anymore. We slowed to a crawl behind a little tan Peugeot.

“Alice,” I moaned. The clock on the dash seemed to be speeding up.

“It’s the only way in,” she tried soothe me. But her voice was too strained to comfort.

The cars continued to edge forward, one car length at a time. The sun beamed down brilliantly, seeming already overhead.

The cars crept one by one toward the city. As we got closer, I could see cars parked by the side of the road with people getting out to walk the rest of the way. At first I thought it was just impatience—something I could easily understand. But then we came around a switchback, and I could see the filled parking lot outside the city wall, the crowds of people walking through the gates. No one was being allowed to drive through.

“Alice,” I whispered urgently.

“I know,” she said. Her face was chiseled from ice.

Now that I was looking, and we were crawling slowly enough to see, I could tell that it was very windy. The people crowding toward the gate gripped their hats and tugged their hair out of their faces. Their clothes

billowed around them. I also noticed that the color red was everywhere. Red shirts, red hats, red flags dripping like long ribbons beside the gate, whipping in the wind—as I watched, the brilliant crimson scarf one woman had tied around her hair was caught in a sudden gust. It twisted up into the air above her, writhing like it was alive. She reached for it, jumping in the air, but it continued to flutter higher, a patch of bloody color against the dull, ancient walls.

“Bella.” Alice spoke quickly in a fierce, low voice. “I can’t see what the guard here will decide now—if this doesn’t work, you’re going to have to go in alone. You’re going to have to run. Just keep asking for the Palazzo dei Priori, and running in the direction they tell you. Don’t get lost.”

“Palazzo dei Priori, Palazzo dei Priori,” I repeated the name over and over again, trying to get it down.

“Or ‘the clock tower,’ if they speak English. I’ll go around and try to find a secluded spot somewhere behind the city where I can go over the wall.”

I nodded. “Palazzo dei Priori.”

“Edward will be under the clock tower, to the north of the square. There’s a narrow alleyway on the right, and he’ll be in the shadow there. You have to get his attention before he can move into the sun.”

I nodded furiously.

Alice was near the front of the line. A man in a navy blue uniform was directing the flow of traffic, turning the cars away from the full lot. They U-turned and headed back to find a place beside the road. Then it was Alice’s turn.

The uniformed man motioned lazily, not paying attention. Alice accelerated, edging around him and heading for the gate. He shouted something at us, but held his ground, waving frantically to keep the next car from following our bad example.

The man at the gate wore a matching uniform. As we approached him, the throngs of tourists passed, crowding the sidewalks, staring curiously at the pushy, flashy Porsche.

The guard stepped into the middle of the street. Alice angled the car carefully before she came to a full stop. The sun beat against my window, and she was in shadow. She swiftly reached behind the seat and grabbed something from her bag.

The guard came around the car with an irritated expression, and tapped on her window angrily.

She rolled the window down halfway, and I watched him do a double take when he saw the face behind the dark glass.

“I’m sorry, only tour buses allowed in the city today, miss,” he said in English, with a heavy accent. He was apologetic, now, as if he wished he had better news for the strikingly beautiful woman.

“It’s a private tour,” Alice said, flashing an alluring smile. She reached her hand out of the window, into the sunlight. I froze, until I realized she was wearing an elbow-length, tan glove. She took his hand, still raised from tapping her window, and pulled it into the car. She put something into his palm, and folded his fingers around it.

His face was dazed as he retrieved his hand and stared at the thick roll of money he now held. The outside bill was a thousand dollar bill.

“Is this a joke?” he mumbled.

Alice’s smile was blinding. “Only if you think it’s funny.”

He looked at her, his eyes staring wide. I glanced nervously at the clock on the dash. If Edward stuck to his plan, we had only five minutes left.

“I’m in a wee bit of a hurry,” she hinted, still smiling.

The guard blinked twice, and then shoved the money inside his vest. He took a step away from the window and waved us on. None of the passing people seemed to notice the quiet exchange. Alice drove into the city, and we both sighed in relief.

The street was very narrow, cobbled with the same color stones as the faded cinnamon brown buildings that darkened the street with their shade. It had the feel of an alleyway. Red flags decorated the walls, spaced only a few yards apart, flapping in the wind that whistled through the narrow lane.

It was crowded, and the foot traffic slowed our progress.

“Just a little farther,” Alice encouraged me; I was gripping the door handle, ready to throw myself into the street as soon as she spoke the word.

She drove in quick spurts and sudden stops, and the people in the crowd shook their fists at us and said angry words that I was glad I couldn’t understand. She turned onto a little path that couldn’t have been

meant for cars; shocked people had to squeeze into doorways as we scraped by. We found another street at the end. The buildings were taller here; they leaned together overhead so that no sunlight touched the pavement—the thrashing red flags on either side nearly met. The crowd was thicker here than anywhere else. Alice stopped the car. I had the door open before we were at a standstill.

She pointed to where the street widened into a patch of bright openness. “There—we’re at the southern end of the square. Run straight across, to the right of the clock tower. I’ll find a way around—”

Her breath caught suddenly, and when she spoke again, her voice was a hiss. “They’re everywhere!”

I froze in place, but she pushed me out of the car. “Forget about them. You have two minutes. Go, Bella, go!” she shouted, climbing out of the car as she spoke.

I didn’t pause to watch Alice melt into the shadows. I didn’t stop to close my door behind me. I shoved a heavy woman out of my way and ran flat out, head down, paying little attention to anything but the uneven stones beneath my feet.

Coming out of the dark lane, I was blinded by the brilliant sunlight beating down into the principal plaza. The wind whooshed into me, flinging my hair into my eyes and blinding me further. It was no wonder that I didn’t see the wall of flesh until I’d smacked into it.

There was no pathway, no crevice between the close pressed bodies. I pushed against them furiously, fighting the hands that shoved back. I heard exclamations of irritation and even pain as I battled

my way through, but none were in a language I understood. The faces were a blur of anger and surprise, surrounded by the ever-present red. A blond woman scowled at me, and the red scarf coiled around her neck looked like a gruesome wound. A child, lifted on a man's shoulders to see over the crowd, grinned down at me, his lips distended over a set of plastic vampire fangs.

The throng jostled around me, spinning me the wrong direction. I was glad the clock was so visible, or I'd never keep my course straight. But both hands on the clock pointed up toward the pitiless sun, and, though I shoved viciously against the crowd, I knew I was too late. I wasn't halfway across. I wasn't going to make it. I was stupid and slow and human, and we were all going to die because of it.

I hoped Alice would get out. I hoped that she would see me from some dark shadow and know that I had failed, so she could go home to Jasper.

I listened, above the angry exclamations, trying to hear the sound of discovery: the gasp, maybe the scream, as Edward came into someone's view.

But there was a break in the crowd—I could see a bubble of space ahead. I pushed urgently toward it, not realizing till I bruised my shins against the bricks that there was a wide, square fountain set into the center of the plaza.

I was nearly crying with relief as I flung my leg over the edge and ran through the knee-deep water. It sprayed all around me as I thrashed my way across the pool. Even in the sun, the wind was glacial, and the wet made the cold actually painful. But the fountain was very wide; it let me cross the center of the square and then some in mere seconds. I didn't

pause when I hit the far edge—I used the low wall as a springboard, throwing myself into the crowd.

They moved more readily for me now, avoiding the icy water that splattered from my dripping clothes as I ran. I glanced up at the clock again.

A deep, booming chime echoed through the square. It throbbed in the stones under my feet. Children cried, covering their ears. And I started screaming as I ran.

"Edward!" I screamed, knowing it was useless. The crowd was too loud, and my voice was breathless with exertion. But I couldn't stop screaming.

The clock tolled again. I ran past a child in his mother's arms—his hair was almost white in the dazzling sunlight. A circle of tall men, all wearing red blazers, called out warnings as I barreled through them. The clock tolled again.

On the other side of the men in blazers, there was a break in the throng, space between the sightseers who milled aimlessly around me. My eyes searched the dark narrow passage to the right of the wide square edifice under the tower. I couldn't see the street level—there were still too many people in the way. The clock tolled again.

It was hard to see now. Without the crowd to break the wind, it whipped at my face and burned my eyes. I couldn't be sure if that was the reason behind my tears, or if I was crying in defeat as the clock tolled again.

A little family of four stood nearest to the alley's mouth. The two girls wore crimson dresses, with matching ribbons tying their dark hair back. The father wasn't tall. It seemed like I could see something

bright in the shadows, just over his shoulder. I hurtled toward them, trying to see past the stinging tears. The clock tolled, and the littlest girl clamped her hands over her ears.

The older girl, just waist high on her mother, hugged her mother's leg and stared into the shadows behind them. As I watched, she tugged on her mother's elbow and pointed toward the darkness. The clock tolled, and I was so close now.

I was close enough to hear her high-pitched voice. Her father stared at me in surprise as I bore down on them, rasping out Edward's name over and over again.

The older girl giggled and said something to her mother, gesturing toward the shadows again impatiently.

I swerved around the father—he clutched the baby out of my way—and sprinted for the gloomy breach behind them as the clock tolled over my head.

"Edward, no!" I screamed, but my voice was lost in the roar of the chime.

I could see him now. And I could see that he could not see me.

It was really him, no hallucination this time. And I realized that my delusions were more flawed than I'd realized; they'd never done him justice.

Edward stood, motionless as a statue, just a few feet from the mouth of the alley. His eyes were closed, the rings underneath them deep purple, his arms relaxed at his sides, his palms turned forward. His expression was very peaceful, like he was dreaming pleasant

things. The marble skin of his chest was bare—there was a small pile of white fabric at his feet. The light reflecting from the pavement of the square gleamed dimly from his skin.

I'd never seen anything more beautiful—even as I ran, gasping and screaming, I could appreciate that. And the last seven months meant nothing. And his words in the forest meant nothing. And it did not matter if he did not want me. I would never want anything but him, no matter how long I lived.

The clock tolled, and he took a large stride toward the light.

"No!" I screamed. "Edward, look at me!"

He wasn't listening. He smiled very slightly. He raised his foot to take the step that would put him directly in the path of the sun.

I slammed into him so hard that the force would have hurled me to the ground if his arms hadn't caught me and held me up. It knocked my breath out of me and snapped my head back.

His dark eyes opened slowly as the clock tolled again.

He looked down at me with quiet surprise.

"Amazing," he said, his exquisite voice full of wonder, slightly amused. "Carlisle was right."

"Edward," I tried to gasp, but my voice had no sound. "You've got to get back into the shadows. You have to move!"

He seemed bemused. His hand brushed softly against my cheek. He didn't appear to notice that I was trying

to force him back. I could have been pushing against the alley walls for all the progress I was making. The clock tolled, but he didn't react.

It was very strange, for I knew we were both in mortal danger. Still, in that instant, I felt well. Whole. I could feel my heart racing in my chest, the blood pulsing hot and fast through my veins again. My lungs filled deep with the sweet scent that came off his skin. It was like there had never been any hole in my chest. I was perfect—not healed, but as if there had been no wound in the first place.

"I can't believe how quick it was. I didn't feel a thing—they're very good," he mused, closing his eyes again and pressing his lips against my hair. His voice was like honey and velvet. "Death, that hath sucked the honey of thy breath, hath had no power yet upon thy beauty," he murmured, and I recognized the line spoken by Romeo in the tomb. The clock boomed out its final chime. "You smell just exactly the same as always," he went on. "So maybe this is hell. I don't care. I'll take it."

"I'm not dead," I interrupted. "And neither are you! Please Edward, we have to move. They can't be far away!"

I struggled in his arms, and his brow furrowed in confusion.

"What was that?" he asked politely.

"We're not dead, not yet! But we have to get out of here before the Volturi—"

Comprehension flickered on his face as I spoke. Before I could finish, he suddenly yanked me away from the edge of the shadows, spinning me effortlessly

so that my back was tight against the brick wall, and his back was to me as he faced away into the alley. His arms spread wide, protectively, in front of me.

I peeked under his arm to see two dark shapes detach themselves from the gloom.

“Greetings, gentlemen,” Edward’s voice was calm and pleasant, on the surface. “I don’t think I’ll be requiring your services today. I would appreciate it very much, however, if you would send my thanks to your masters.”

“Shall we take this conversation to a more appropriate venue?” a smooth voice whispered menacingly.

“I don’t believe that will be necessary.” Edward’s voice was harder now. “I know your instructions, Felix. I haven’t broken any rules.”

“Felix merely meant to point out the proximity of the sun,” the other shadow said in a soothing tone. They were both concealed within smoky gray cloaks that reached to the ground and undulated in the wind. “Let us seek better cover.”

“I’ll be right behind you,” Edward said dryly. “Bella, why don’t you go back to the square and enjoy the festival?”

“No, bring the girl,” the first shadow said, somehow injecting a leer into his whisper.

“I don’t think so.” The pretense of civility disappeared. Edward’s voice was flat and icy. His weight shifted infinitesimally, and I could see that he was preparing to fight.

“No.” I mouthed the word.

“Shh,” he murmured, only for me.

“Felix,” the second, more reasonable shadow cautioned. “Not here.” He turned to Edward. “Aro would simply like to speak with you again, if you have decided not to force our hand after all.”

“Certainly,” Edward agreed. “But the girl goes free.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible,” the polite shadow said regretfully. “We do have rules to obey.”

“Then I’m afraid that I’ll be unable to accept Aro’s invitation, Demetri.”

“That’s just fine,” Felix purred. My eyes were adjusting to the deep shade, and I could see that Felix was very big, tall and thick through the shoulders. His size reminded me of Emmett.

“Aro will be disappointed,” Demetri sighed.

“I’m sure he’ll survive the letdown,” Edward replied.

Felix and Demetri stole closer toward the mouth of the alley, spreading out slightly so they could come at Edward from two sides. They meant to force him deeper into the alley, to avoid a scene. No reflected light found access to their skin; they were safe inside their cloaks.

Edward didn’t move an inch. He was dooming himself by protecting me.

Abruptly, Edward’s head whipped around, toward the darkness of the winding alley, and Demetri and Felix

did the same, in response to some sound or movement too subtle for my senses.

“Let’s behave ourselves, shall we?” a lilting voice suggested. “There are ladies present.”

Alice tripped lightly to Edward’s side, her stance casual. There was no hint of any underlying tension. She looked so tiny, so fragile. Her little arms swung like a child’s.

Yet Demetri and Felix both straightened up, their cloaks swirling slightly as a gust of wind funneled through the alley. Felix’s face soured. Apparently, they didn’t like even numbers.

“We’re not alone,” she reminded them.

Demetri glanced over his shoulder. A few yards into the square, the little family, with the girls in their red dresses, was watching us. The mother was speaking urgently to her husband, her eyes on the five of us. She looked away when Demetri met her gaze. The man walked a few steps farther into the plaza, and tapped one of the red-blazered men on the shoulder.

Demetri shook his head. “Please, Edward, let’s be reasonable,” he said.

“Let’s,” Edward agreed. “And we’ll leave quietly now, with no one the wiser.”

Demetri sighed in frustration. “At least let us discuss this more privately.”

Six men in red now joined the family as they watched us with anxious expressions. I was very conscious of Edward’s protective stance in front of me—sure that

this was what caused their alarm. I wanted to scream to them to run.

Edward's teeth came together audibly. "No."

Felix smiled.

"Enough."

The voice was high, reedy, and it came from behind us.

I peeked under Edward's other arm to see a small, dark shape coming toward us. By the way the edges billowed, I knew it would be another one of them. Who else?

At first I thought it was a young boy. The newcomer was as tiny as Alice, with lank, pale brown hair trimmed short. The body under the cloak—which was darker, almost black—was slim and androgynous. But the face was too pretty for a boy. The wide-eyed, full-lipped face would make a Botticelli angel look like a gargoyle. Even allowing for the dull crimson irises.

Her size was so insignificant that the reaction to her appearance confused me. Felix and Demetri relaxed immediately, stepping back from their offensive positions to blend again with the shadows of the overhanging walls.

Edward dropped his arms and relaxed his position as well—but in defeat.

"Jane," he sighed in recognition and resignation.

Alice folded her arms across her chest, her expression impassive.

"Follow me," Jane spoke again, her childish voice a monotone. She turned her back on us and drifted silently into the dark.

Felix gestured for us to go first, smirking.

Alice walked after the little Jane at once. Edward wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me along beside her. The alley angled slightly downward as it narrowed. I looked up at him with frantic questions in my eyes, but he just shook his head. Though I couldn't hear the others behind us, I was sure they were there.

"Well, Alice," Edward said conversationally as we walked. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised to see you here."

"It was my mistake," Alice answered in the same tone. "It was my job to set it right."

"What happened?" His voice was polite, as if he were barely interested. I imagined this was due to the listening ears behind us.

"It's a long story." Alice's eyes flickered toward me and away. "In summary, she did jump off a cliff, but she wasn't trying to kill herself. Bella's all about the extreme sports these days."

I flushed and turned my eyes straight ahead, looking after the dark shadow that I could no longer see. I could imagine what he was hearing in Alice's thoughts now. Near-drownings, stalking vampires, werewolf friends…

"Hm," Edward said curtly, and the casual tone of his voice was gone.

There was a loose curve to the alley, still slanting downward, so I didn't see the squared-off dead end coming until we reached the flat, windowless, brick face. The little one called Jane was nowhere to be seen.

Alice didn't hesitate, didn't break pace as she strode toward the wall. Then, with easy grace, she slid down an open hole in the street.

It looked like a drain, sunk into the lowest point of the paving. I hadn't noticed it until Alice disappeared, but the grate was halfway pushed aside. The hole was small, and black.

I balked.

"It's all right, Bella," Edward said in a low voice. "Alice will catch you."

I eyed the hole doubtfully. I imagine he would have gone first, if Demetri and Felix hadn't been waiting, smug and silent, behind us.

I crouched down, swinging my legs into the narrow gap.

"Alice?" I whispered, voice trembling.

"I'm right here, Bella," she reassured me. Her voice came from too far below to make me feel better.

Edward took my wrists—his hands felt like stones in winter—and lowered me into the blackness.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Drop her," Alice called.

I closed my eyes so I couldn't see the darkness, scrunching them together in terror, clamping my mouth shut so I wouldn't scream. Edward let me fall.

It was silent and short. The air whipped past me for just half a second, and then, with a huff as I exhaled, Alice's waiting arms caught me.

I was going to have bruises; her arms were very hard. She stood me upright.

It was dim, but not black at the bottom. The light from the hole above provided a faint glow, reflecting wetly from the stones under my feet. The light vanished for a second, and then Edward was a faint, white radiance beside me. He put his arm around me, holding me close to his side, and began to tow me swiftly forward. I wrapped both arms around his cold waist, and tripped and stumbled my way across the uneven stone surface. The sound of the heavy grate sliding over the drain hole behind us rang with metallic finality.

The dim light from the street was quickly lost in the gloom. The sound of my staggering footsteps echoed through the black space; it sounded very wide, but I couldn't be sure. There were no sounds other than my frantic heartbeat and my feet on the wet stones—except for once, when an impatient sigh whispered from behind me.

Edward held me tightly. He reached his free hand across his body to hold my face, too, his smooth thumb tracing across my lips. Now and then, I felt his face press into my hair. I realized that this was the only reunion we would get, and I clutched myself closer to him.

For now, it felt like he wanted me, and that was enough to offset the horror of the subterranean tunnel and the prowling vampires behind us. It was probably no more than guilt—the same guilt that compelled him to come here to die when he'd believed that it was his fault that I'd killed myself. But I felt his lips press silently against my forehead, and I didn't care what the motivation was. At least I could be with him again before I died. That was better than a long life.

I wished I could ask him exactly what was going to happen now. I wanted desperately to know how we were going to die—as if that would somehow make it better, knowing in advance. But I couldn't speak, even in a whisper, surrounded as we were. The others could hear everything—my every breath, my every heartbeat.

The path beneath our feet continued to slant downward, taking us deeper into the ground, and it made me claustrophobic. Only Edward's hand, soothing against my face, kept me from screaming out loud.

I couldn't tell where the light was coming from, but it slowly turned dark gray instead of black. We were in a low, arched tunnel. Long trails of ebony moisture seeped down the gray stones, like they were bleeding ink.

I was shaking, and I thought it was from fear. It wasn't until my teeth started to chatter together that I realized I was cold. My clothes were still wet, and the temperature underneath the city was wintry. As was Edward's skin.

He realized this at the same time I did, and let go of me, keeping only my hand.

"N-n-no," I chattered, throwing my arms around him. I didn't care if I froze. Who knew how long we had left?

His cold hand chafed against my arm, trying to warm me with the friction.

We hurried through the tunnel, or it felt like hurrying to me. My slow progress irritated someone—I guessed Felix—and I heard him heave a sigh now and then.

At the end of the tunnel was a grate—the iron bars were rusting, but thick as my arm. A small door made of thinner, interlaced bars was standing open. Edward ducked through and hurried on to a larger, brighter stone room. The grille slammed shut with a clang, followed by the snap of a lock. I was too afraid to look behind me.

On the other side of the long room was a low, heavy wooden door. It was very thick—as I could tell because it, too, stood open.

We stepped through the door, and I glanced around me in surprise, relaxing automatically. Beside me, Edward tensed, his jaw clenched tight.

# Chapter 21

## VERDICT

We were in a brightly lit, unremarkable hallway. The walls were off-white, the floor carpeted in industrial gray. Common rectangular fluorescent lights were spaced evenly along the ceiling. It was warmer here, for which I was grateful. This hall seemed very benign after the gloom of the ghoulish stone sewers.

Edward didn't seem to agree with my assessment. He glowered darkly down the long hallway, toward the slight, black shrouded figure at the end, standing by an elevator.

He pulled me along, and Alice walked on my other side. The heavy door creaked shut behind us, and then there was the thud of a bolt sliding home.

Jane waited by the elevator, one hand holding the doors open for us. Her expression was apathetic.

Once inside the elevator, the three vampires that belonged to the Volturi relaxed further. They threw back their cloaks, letting the hoods fall back on their shoulders. Felix and Demetri were both of a slightly olive complexion—it looked odd combined with their chalky pallor. Felix's black hair was cropped short, but Demetri's waved to his shoulders. Their irises were deep crimson around the edges, darkening until they were black around the pupil. Under the shrouds, their clothes were modern, pale, and nondescript. I cowered in the corner, cringing against Edward. His hand still rubbed against my arm. He never took his eyes off Jane.

The elevator ride was short; we stepped out into what looked like a posh office reception area. The walls were paneled in wood, the floors carpeted in thick, deep green. There were no windows, but large, brightly lit paintings of the Tuscan countryside hung everywhere as replacements. Pale leather couches were arranged in cozy groupings, and the glossy tables held crystal vases full of vibrantly colored bouquets. The flowers' smell reminded me of a funeral home.

In the middle of the room was a high, polished mahogany counter. I gawked in astonishment at the woman behind it.

She was tall, with dark skin and green eyes. She would have been very pretty in any other company—but not here. Because she was every bit as human as I was. I couldn't comprehend what this human woman was doing here, totally at ease, surrounded by vampires.

She smiled politely in welcome. "Good afternoon, Jane," she said. There was no surprise in her face as she glanced at Jane's company. Not Edward, his bare chest glinting dimly in the white lights, or even me, disheveled and comparatively hideous.

Jane nodded. "Gianna." She continued toward a set of double doors in the back of the room, and we followed.

As Felix passed the desk, he winked at Gianna, and she giggled.

On the other side of the wooden doors was a different kind of reception. The pale boy in the pearl gray suit could have been Jane's twin. His hair was darker, and his lips were not as full, but he was just as

lovely. He came forward to meet us. He smiled, reaching for her. "Jane."

"Alec," she responded, embracing the boy. They kissed each other's cheeks on both sides. Then he looked at us.

"They send you out for one and you come back with two…and a half," he noted, looking at me. "Nice work."

She laughed—the sound sparkled with delight like a baby's cooing.

"Welcome back, Edward," Alec greeted him. "You seem in a better mood."

"Marginally," Edward agreed in a flat voice. I glanced at Edward's hard face, and wondered how his mood could have been darker before.

Alec chuckled, and examined me as I clung to Edward's side. "And this is the cause of all the trouble?" he asked, skeptical.

Edward only smiled, his expression contemptuous. Then he froze.

"Dibs," Felix called casually from behind.

Edward turned, a low snarl building deep in his chest. Felix smiled—his hand was raised, palm up; he curled his fingers twice, inviting Edward forward.

Alice touched Edward's arm. "Patience," she cautioned him.

They exchanged a long glance, and I wished I could hear what she was telling him. I figured that it was

something to do with not attacking Felix, because Edward took a deep breath and turned back to Alec.

“Aro will be so pleased to see you again,” Alec said, as if nothing had passed.

“Let’s not keep him waiting,” Jane suggested.

Edward nodded once.

Alec and Jane, holding hands, led the way down yet another wide, ornate hall—would there ever be an end?

They ignored the doors at the end of the hall—doors entirely sheathed in gold—stopping halfway down the hall and sliding aside a piece of the paneling to expose a plain wooden door. It wasn’t locked. Alec held it open for Jane.

I wanted to groan when Edward pulled me through to the other side of the door. It was the same ancient stone as the square, the alley, and the sewers. And it was dark and cold again.

The stone antechamber was not large. It opened quickly into a brighter, cavernous room, perfectly round like a huge castle turret…which was probably exactly what it was. Two stories up, long window slits threw thin rectangles of bright sunlight onto the stone floor below. There were no artificial lights. The only furniture in the room were several massive wooden chairs, like thrones, that were spaced unevenly, flush with the curving stone walls. In the very center of the circle, in a slight depression, was another drain. I wondered if they used it as an exit, like the hole in the street.

The room was not empty. A handful of people were convened in seemingly relaxed conversation. The murmur of low, smooth voices was a gentle hum in the air. As I watched, a pair of pale women in summer dresses paused in a patch of light, and, like prisms, their skin threw the light in rainbow sparkles against the sienna walls.

The exquisite faces all turned toward our party as we entered the room. Most of the immortals were dressed in inconspicuous pants and shirts—things that wouldn't stick out at all on the streets below. But the man who spoke first wore one of the long robes. It was pitch-black, and brushed against the floor. For a moment, I thought his long, jet-black hair was the hood of his cloak.

"Jane, dear one, you've returned!" he cried in evident delight. His voice was just a soft sighing.

He drifted forward, and the movement flowed with such surreal grace that I gawked, my mouth hanging open. Even Alice, whose every motion looked like dancing, could not compare.

I was only more astonished as he floated closer and I could see his face. It was not like the unnaturally attractive faces that surrounded him (for he did not approach us alone; the entire group converged around him, some following, and some walking ahead of him with the alert manner of bodyguards). I couldn't decide if his face was beautiful or not. I suppose the features were perfect. But he was as different from the vampires beside him as they were from me. His skin was translucently white, like onionskin, and it looked just as delicate—it stood in shocking contrast to the long black hair that framed his face. I felt a strange, horrifying urge to touch his cheek, to see if it was softer than Edward's or Alice's,

or if it was powdery, like chalk. His eyes were red, the same as the others around him, but the color was clouded, milky; I wondered if his vision was affected by the haze.

He glided to Jane, took her face in his papery hands, kissed her lightly on her full lips, and then floated back a step.

"Yes, Master." Jane smiled; the expression made her look like an angelic child. "I brought him back alive, just as you wished."

"Ah, Jane." He smiled, too. "You are such a comfort to me."

He turned his misty eyes toward us, and the smile brightened—became ecstatic.

"And Alice and Bella, too!" he rejoiced, clapping his thin hands together. "This is a happy surprise! Wonderful!"

I stared in shock as he called our names informally, as if we were old friends dropping in for an unexpected visit.

He turned to our hulking escort. "Felix, be a dear and tell my brothers about our company. I'm sure they wouldn't want to miss this."

"Yes, Master." Felix nodded and disappeared back the way we had come.

"You see, Edward?" The strange vampire turned and smiled at Edward like a fond but scolding grandfather. "What did I tell you? Aren't you glad that I didn't give you what you wanted yesterday?"

"Yes, Aro, I am," he agreed, tightening his arm around my waist.

"I love a happy ending." Aro sighed. "They are so rare. But I want the whole story. How did this happen? Alice?" He turned to gaze at Alice with curious, misty eyes. "Your brother seemed to think you infallible, but apparently there was some mistake."

"Oh, I'm far from infallible." She flashed a dazzling smile. She looked perfectly at ease, except that her hands were balled into tight little fists. "As you can see today, I cause problems as often as I cure them."

"You're too modest," Aro chided. "I've seen some of your more amazing exploits, and I must admit I've never observed anything like your talent. Wonderful!"

Alice flickered a glance at Edward. Aro did not miss it.

"I'm sorry, we haven't been introduced properly at all, have we? It's just that I feel like I know you already, and I tend get ahead of myself. Your brother introduced us yesterday, in a peculiar way. You see, I share some of your brother's talent, only I am limited in a way that he is not." Aro shook his head; his tone was envious.

"And also exponentially more powerful," Edward added dryly. He looked at Alice as he swiftly explained. "Aro needs physical contact to hear your thoughts, but he hears much more than I do. You know I can only hear what's passing through your head in the moment. Aro hears every thought your mind has ever had."

Alice raised her delicate eyebrows, and Edward inclined his head.

Aro didn't miss that either.

"But to be able to hear from a distance . . ." Aro sighed, gesturing toward the two of them, and the exchange that had just taken place. "That would be so convenient."

Aro looked over our shoulders. All the other heads turned in the same direction, including Jane, Alec, and Demetri, who stood silently beside us.

I was the slowest to turn. Felix was back, and behind him floated two more black-robed men. Both looked very much like Aro, one even had the same flowing black hair. The other had a shock of snow-white hair—the same shade as his face—that brushed against his shoulders. Their faces had identical, paper-thin skin.

The trio from Carlisle's painting was complete, unchanged by the last three hundred years since it was painted.

"Marcus, Caius, look!" Aro crooned. "Bella is alive after all, and Alice is here with her! Isn't that wonderful?"

Neither of the other two looked as if wonderful would be their first choice of words. The dark-haired man seemed utterly bored, like he'd seen too many millennia of Aro's enthusiasm. The other's face was sour under the snowy hair.

Their lack of interest did not curb Aro's enjoyment.

"Let us have the story," Aro almost sang in his feathery voice.

The white-haired ancient vampire drifted away, gliding toward one of the wooden thrones. The other paused beside Aro, and he reached his hand out, at first I thought to take Aro's hand. But he just touched Aro's palm briefly and then dropped his hand to his side. Aro raised one black brow. I wondered how his papery skin did not crumple in the effort.

Edward snorted very quietly, and Alice looked at him, curious.

"Thank you, Marcus," Aro said. "That's quite interesting."

I realized, a second late, that Marcus was letting Aro know his thoughts.

Marcus didn't look interested. He glided away from Aro to join the one who must be Caius, seated against the wall. Two of the attending vampires followed silently behind him—bodyguards, like I'd thought before. I could see that the two women in the sundresses had gone to stand beside Caius in the same manner. The idea of any vampire needing a guard was faintly ridiculous to me, but maybe the ancient ones were as frail as their skin suggested.

Aro was shaking his head. "Amazing," he said. "Absolutely amazing."

Alice's expression was frustrated. Edward turned to her and explained again in a swift, low voice. "Marcus sees relationships. He's surprised by the intensity of ours."

Aro smiled. "So convenient," he repeated to himself. Then he spoke to us. "It takes quite a bit to surprise Marcus, I can assure you."

I looked at Marcus's dead face, and I believed that.

"It's just so difficult to understand, even now," Aro mused, staring at Edward's arm wrapped around me. It was hard for me to follow Aro's chaotic train of thought. I struggled to keep up. "How can you stand so close to her like that?"

"It's not without effort," Edward answered calmly.

"But still—la tua cantante! What a waste!"

Edward chuckled once without humor. "I look at it more as a price."

Aro was skeptical. "A very high price."

"Opportunity cost."

Aro laughed. "If I hadn't smelled her through your memories, I wouldn't have believed the call of anyone's blood could be so strong. I've never felt anything like it myself. Most of us would trade much for such a gift, and yet you…."

"Waste it," Edward finished, his voice sarcastic now.

Aro laughed again. "Ah, how I miss my friend Carlisle! You remind me of him—only he was not so angry."

"Carlisle outshines me in many other ways as well."

"I certainly never thought to see Carlisle bested for self-control of all things, but you put him to shame."

"Hardly." Edward sounded impatient. As if he were tired of the preliminaries. It made me more afraid; I couldn't help but try to imagine what he expected would follow.

"I am gratified by his success," Aro mused. "Your memories of him are quite a gift for me, though they astonish me exceedingly. I am surprised by how it…pleases me, his success in this unorthodox path he's chosen. I expected that he would waste, weaken with time. I'd scoffed at his plan to find others who would share his peculiar vision. Yet, somehow, I'm happy to be wrong."

Edward didn't reply.

"But your restraint!" Aro sighed. "I did not know such strength was possible. To inure yourself against such a siren call, not just once but again and again—if I had not felt it myself, I would not have believed."

Edward gazed back at Aro's admiration with no expression. I knew his face well enough—time had not changed that—to guess at something seething beneath the surface. I fought to keep my breathing even.

"Just remembering how she appeals to you . . ." Aro chuckled. "It makes me thirsty."

Edward tensed.

"Don't be disturbed," Aro reassured him. "I mean her no harm. But I am so curious, about one thing in particular." He eyed me with bright interest. "May I?" he asked eagerly, lifting one hand.

"Ask her," Edward suggested in a flat voice.

"Of course, how rude of me!" Aro exclaimed. "Bella," he addressed me directly now. "I'm fascinated that you are the one exception to Edward's impressive talent—so very interesting that such a thing should occur! And I was wondering, since our talents are

similar in many ways, if you would be so kind as to allow me to try—to see if you are an exception for me, as well?"

My eyes flashed up to Edward's face in terror. Despite Aro's overt politeness, I didn't believe I really had a choice. I was horrified at the thought of allowing him to touch me, and yet also perversely intrigued by the chance to feel his strange skin.

Edward nodded in encouragement—whether because he was sure Aro would not hurt me, or because there was no choice, I couldn't tell.

I turned back to Aro and raised my hand slowly in front of me. It was trembling.

He glided closer, and I believe he meant his expression to be reassuring. But his papery features were too strange, too alien and frightening, to reassure. The look on his face was more confident than his words had been.

Aro reached out, as if to shake my hand, and pressed his insubstantial-looking skin against mine. It was hard, but felt brittle—shale rather than granite—and even colder than I expected.

His filmy eyes smiled down at mine, and it was impossible to look away. They were mesmerizing in an odd, unpleasant way.

Aro's face altered as I watched. The confidence wavered and became first doubt, then incredulity before he calmed it into a friendly mask.

"So very interesting," he said as he released my hand and drifted back.

My eyes flickered to Edward, and, though his face was composed, I thought he seemed a little smug.

Aro continued to drift with a thoughtful expression. He was quiet for a moment, his eyes flickering between the three of us. Then, abruptly, he shook his head.

“A first,” he said to himself. “I wonder if she is immune to our other talents....Jane, dear?”

“No!” Edward snarled the word. Alice grabbed his arm with a restraining hand. He shook her off.

Little Jane smiled up happily at Aro. “Yes, Master?”

Edward was truly snarling now, the sound ripping and tearing from him, glaring at Aro with baleful eyes. The room had gone still, everyone watching him with amazed disbelief, as if he were committing some embarrassing social faux pas. I saw Felix grin hopefully and move a step forward. Aro glanced at him once, and he froze in place, his grin turning to a sulky expression.

Then he spoke to Jane. “I was wondering, my dear one, if Bella is immune to you.”

I could barely hear Aro over Edward’s furious growls. He let go of me, moving to hide me from their view. Caius ghosted in our direction, with his entourage, to watch.

Jane turned toward us with a beatific smile.

“Don’t!” Alice cried as Edward launched himself at the little girl.

Before I could react, before anyone could jump between them, before Aro's bodyguards could tense, Edward was on the ground.

No one had touched him, but he was on the stone floor writhing in obvious agony, while I stared in horror.

Jane was smiling only at him now, and it all clicked together. What Alice had said about formidable gifts, why everyone treated Jane with such deference, and why Edward had thrown himself in her path before she could do that to me.

"Stop!" I shrieked, my voice echoing in the silence, jumping forward to put myself between them. But Alice threw her arms around me in an unbreakable grasp and ignored my struggles. No sound escaped Edward's lips as he cringed against the stones. It felt like my head would explode from the pain of watching this.

"Jane," Aro recalled her in a tranquil voice. She looked up quickly, still smiling with pleasure, her eyes questioning. As soon as Jane looked away, Edward was still.

Aro inclined his head toward me.

Jane turned her smile in my direction.

I didn't even meet her gaze. I watched Edward from the prison of Alice's arms, still struggling pointlessly.

"He's fine," Alice whispered in a tight voice. As she spoke, he sat up, and then sprang lightly to his feet. His eyes met mine, and they were horror-struck. At first I thought the horror was for what he had just

suffered. But then he looked quickly at Jane, and back to me—and his face relaxed into relief.

I looked at Jane, too, and she no longer smiled. She glared at me, her jaw clenched with the intensity of her focus. I shrank back, waiting for the pain.

Nothing happened.

Edward was by my side again. He touched Alice's arm, and she surrendered me to him.

Aro started to laugh. "Ha, ha, ha," he chuckled. "This is wonderful!"

Jane hissed in frustration, leaning forward like she was preparing to spring.

"Don't be put out, dear one," Aro said in a comforting tone, placing a powder-light hand on her shoulder. "She confounds us all."

Jane's upper lip curled back over her teeth as she continued to glare at me.

"Ha, ha, ha," Aro chortled again. "You're very brave, Edward, to endure in silence. I asked Jane to do that to me once—just out of curiosity." He shook his head in admiration.

Edward glared, disgusted.

"So what do we do with you now?" Aro sighed.

Edward and Alice stiffened. This was the part they'd been waiting for. I began to tremble.

"I don't suppose there's any chance that you've changed your mind?" Aro asked Edward hopefully.

"Your talent would be an excellent addition to our little company."

Edward hesitated. From the corner of my eye, I saw both Felix and Jane grimace.

Edward seemed to weigh each word before he spoke it. "I'd…rather…not."

"Alice?" Aro asked, still hopeful. "Would you perhaps be interested in joining with us?"

"No, thank you," Alice said.

"And you, Bella?" Aro raised his eyebrows.

Edward hissed, low in my ears. I stared at Aro blankly. Was he joking? Or was he really asking me if I wanted to stay for dinner?

It was the white-haired Caius who broke the silence.

"What?" he demanded of Aro; his voice, though no more than a whisper, was flat.

"Caius, surely you see the potential," Aro chided him affectionately. "I haven't seen a prospective talent so promising since we found Jane and Alec. Can you imagine the possibilities when she is one of us?"

Caius looked away with a caustic expression. Jane's eyes sparked with indignation at the comparison.

Edward fumed beside me. I could hear a rumble in his chest, building toward a growl. I couldn't let his temper get him hurt.

"No, thank you," I spoke up in barely more than a whisper, my voice breaking in fright.

Aro sighed. “That’s unfortunate. Such a waste.”

Edward hissed. “Join or die, is that it? I suspected as much when we were brought to this room. So much for your laws.”

The tone of his voice surprised me. He sounded irate, but there was something deliberate about his delivery—as if he’d chosen his words with great care.

“Of course not.” Aro blinked, astonished. “We were already convened here, Edward, awaiting Heidi’s return. Not for you.”

“Aro,” Caius hissed. “The law claims them.”

Edward glared at Caius. “How so?” he demanded. He must have known what Caius was thinking, but he seemed determined to make him speak it aloud.

Caius pointed a skeletal finger at me. “She knows too much. You have exposed our secrets.” His voice was papery thin, just like his skin.

“There are a few humans in on your charade here, as well,” Edward reminded him, and I thought of the pretty receptionist below.

Caius’s face twisted into a new expression. Was it supposed to be a smile?

“Yes,” he agreed. “But when they are no longer useful to us, they will serve to sustain us. That is not your plan for this one. If she betrays our secrets, are you prepared to destroy her? I think not,” he scoffed.

“I wouldn’t—,” I began, still whispering. Caius silenced me with an icy look.

“Nor do you intend to make her one of us,” Caius continued. “Therefore, she is a vulnerability. Though it is true, for this, only her life is forfeit. You may leave if you wish.”

Edward bared his teeth.

“That’s what I thought,” Caius said, with something akin to pleasure. Felix leaned forward, eager.

“Unless…,” Aro interrupted. He looked unhappy with the way the conversation had gone. “Unless you do intend to give her immortality?”

Edward pursed his lips, hesitating for a moment before he answered. “And if I do?”

Aro smiled, happy again. “Why, then you would be free to go home and give my regards to my friend Carlisle.” His expression turned more hesitant. “But I’m afraid you would have to mean it.”

Aro raised his hand in front of him.

Caius, who had begun to scowl furiously, relaxed.

Edward’s lips tightened into a fierce line. He stared into my eyes, and I stared back.

“Mean it,” I whispered. “Please.”

Was it really such a loathsome idea? Would he rather die than change me? I felt like I’d been kicked in the stomach.

Edward stared down at me with a tortured expression.

And then Alice stepped away from us, forward toward Aro. We turned to watch her. Her hand was raised like his.

She didn't say anything, and Aro waved off his anxious guard as they moved to block her approach. Aro met her halfway, and took her hand with an eager, acquisitive glint in his eyes.

He bent his head over their touching hands, his eyes closing as he concentrated. Alice was motionless, her face blank. I heard Edward's teeth snap together.

No one moved. Aro seemed frozen over Alice's hand. The seconds passed and I grew more and more stressed, wondering how much time would pass before it was too much time. Before it meant something was wrong—more wrong than it already was.

Another agonizing moment passed, and then Aro's voice broke the silence.

"Ha, ha, ha," he laughed, his head still bent forward. He looked up slowly, his eyes bright with excitement. "That was fascinating!"

Alice smiled dryly. "I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"To see the things you've seen—especially the ones that haven't happened yet!" He shook his head in wonder.

"But that will," she reminded him, voice calm.

"Yes, yes, it's quite determined. Certainly there's no problem."

Caius looked bitterly disappointed—a feeling he seemed to share with Felix and Jane.

“Aro,” Caius complained.

“Dear Caius,” Aro smiled. “Do not fret. Think of the possibilities! They do not join us today, but we can always hope for the future. Imagine the joy young Alice alone would bring to our little household….Besides, I’m so terribly curious to see how Bella turns out!”

Aro seemed convinced. Did he not realize how subjective Alice’s visions were? That she could make up her mind to transform me today, and then change it tomorrow? A million tiny decisions, her decisions and so many others’, too—Edward’s—could alter her path, and with that, the future.

And would it really matter that Alice was willing, would it make any difference if I did become a vampire, when the idea was so repulsive to Edward? If death was, to him, a better alternative than having me around forever, an immortal annoyance? Terrified as I was, I felt myself sinking down into depression, drowning in it….

“Then we are free to go now?” Edward asked in an even voice.

“Yes, yes,” Aro said pleasantly. “But please visit again. It’s been absolutely enthralling!”

“And we will visit you as well,” Caius promised, his eyes suddenly half-closed like the heavy-lidded gaze of a lizard. “To be sure that you follow through on your side. Were I you, I would not delay too long. We do not offer second chances.”

Edward's jaw clenched tight, but he nodded once.

Caius smirked and drifted back to where Marcus still sat, unmoving and uninterested.

Felix groaned.

"Ah, Felix." Aro smiled, amused. "Heidi will be here at any moment. Patience."

"Hmm." Edward's voice had a new edge to it. "In that case, perhaps we'd better leave sooner rather than later."

"Yes," Aro agreed. "That's a good idea. Accidents do happen. Please wait below until after dark, though, if you don't mind."

"Of course," Edward agreed, while I cringed at the thought of waiting out the day before we could escape.

"And here," Aro added, motioning to Felix with one finger. Felix came forward at once, and Aro unfastened the gray cloak the huge vampire wore, pulling from his shoulders. He tossed it to Edward. "Take this. You're a little conspicuous."

Edward put the long cloak on, leaving the hood down.

Aro sighed. "It suits you."

Edward chuckled, but broke off suddenly, glancing over his shoulder. "Thank you, Aro. We'll wait below."

"Goodbye, young friends," Aro said, his eyes bright as he stared in the same direction.

"Let's go," Edward said, urgent now.

Demetri gestured that we should follow, and then set off the way we'd come in, the only exit by the look of things.

Edward pulled me swiftly along beside him. Alice was close by my other side, her face hard.

"Not fast enough," she muttered.

I stared up at her, frightened, but she only seemed chagrined. It was then that I first heard the babble of voices—loud, rough voices—coming from the antechamber.

"Well this is unusual," a man's coarse voice boomed.

"So medieval," an unpleasantly shrill, female voice gushed back.

A large crowd was coming through the little door, filling the smaller stone chamber. Demetri motioned for us to make room. We pressed back against the cold wall to let them pass.

The couple in front, Americans from the sound of them, glanced around themselves with appraising eyes.

"Welcome, guests! Welcome to Volterra!" I could hear Aro sing from the big turret room.

The rest of them, maybe forty or more, filed in after the couple. Some studied the setting like tourists. A few even snapped pictures. Others looked confused, as if the story that had led them to this room was not making sense anymore. I noticed one small, dark woman in particular. Around her neck was a rosary, and she gripped the cross tightly in one hand. She walked more slowly than the others, touching

someone now and then and asking a question in an unfamiliar language. No one seemed to understand her, and her voice grew more panicked.

Edward pulled my face against his chest, but it was too late. I already understood.

As soon as the smallest break appeared, Edward pushed me quickly toward the door. I could feel the horrified expression on my face, and the tears beginning to pool in my eyes.

The ornate golden hallway was quiet, empty except for one gorgeous, statuesque woman. She stared at us curiously, me in particular.

“Welcome home, Heidi,” Demetri greeted her from behind us.

Heidi smiled absently. She reminded me of Rosalie, though they looked nothing alike—it was just that her beauty, too, was exceptional, unforgettable. I couldn’t seem to look away.

She was dressed to emphasize that beauty. Her amazingly long legs, darkened with tights, were exposed by the shortest of miniskirts. Her top was long-sleeved and high-necked, but extremely close-fitting, and constructed of red vinyl. Her long mahogany hair was lustrous, and her eyes were the strangest shade of violet—a color that might result from blue-tinted contacts over red irises.

“Demetri,” she responded in a silky voice, her eyes flickering between my face and Edward’s gray cloak.

“Nice fishing,” Demetri complimented her, and I suddenly understood the attention-grabbing outfit

she wore…she was not only the fisherman, but also the bait.

“Thanks.” She flashed a stunning smile. “Aren’t you coming?”

“In a minute. Save a few for me.”

Heidi nodded and ducked through the door with one last curious look at me.

Edward set a pace that had me running to keep up. But we still couldn’t get through the ornate door at the end of the hallway before the screaming started.

# Chapter 22

## FLIGHT

Demetri left us in the cheerfully opulent reception area, where the woman Gianna was still at her post behind the polished counter. Bright, harmless music tinkled from hidden speakers.

“Do not leave until dark,” he warned us.

Edward nodded, and Demetri hurried away.

Gianna did not seem at all surprised by the exchange, though she did eye Edward’s borrowed cloak with shrewd speculation.

“Are you all right?” Edward asked under his breath, too low for the human woman to hear. His voice was rough—if velvet can be rough—with anxiety. Still stressed by our situation, I imagined.

“You’d better make her sit before she falls,” Alice said. “She’s going to pieces.”

It was only then that I realize I was shaking, shaking hard, my entire frame vibrating until my teeth chattered and the room around me seemed to wobble and blur in my eyes. For one wild second, I wondered if this was how Jacob felt just before exploding into a werewolf.

I heard a sound that didn’t make sense, a strange, ripping counterpart to the otherwise cheery background music. Distracted by the shaking, I couldn’t tell where it was coming from.

"Shh, Bella, shh," Edward said as he pulled me to the sofa farthest away from the curious human at the desk.

"I think she's having hysterics. Maybe you should slap her," Alice suggested.

Edward threw a frantic glance at her.

Then I understood. Oh. The noise was me. The ripping sound was the sobs coming from my chest. That's what was shaking me.

"It's all right, you're safe, it's all right," he chanted again and again. He pulled me onto his lap and tucked the thick wool cloak around me, protecting me from his cold skin.

I knew it was stupid to react like this. Who knew how much time I had to look at his face? He was saved, and I was saved, and he could leave me as soon as we were free. To have my eyes so filled with tears that I could not see his features clearly was wasteful—insanity.

But, behind my eyes where the tears could not wash the image away, I could still see the panicked face of the tiny woman with the rosary.

"All those people," I sobbed.

"I know," he whispered.

"It's so horrible."

"Yes, it is. I wish you hadn't had to see that."

I rested my head against his cold chest, using the thick cloak to wipe my eyes. I took a few deep breaths, trying to calm myself.

"Is there anything I can get you?" a voice asked politely. It was Gianna, leaning over Edward's shoulder with a look that was both concerned and yet still professional and detached at the same time. It didn't seem to bother her that her face was inches from a hostile vampire. She was either totally oblivious, or very good at her job.

"No," Edward answered coldly.

She nodded, smiled at me, and then disappeared.

I waited until she was out of hearing range. "Does she know what's going on here?" I demanded, my voice low and hoarse. I was getting control of myself, my breathing evening out.

"Yes. She knows everything," Edward told me.

"Does she know they're going to kill her someday?"

"She's knows it's a possibility," he said.

That surprised me.

Edward's face was hard to read. "She's hoping they'll decide to keep her."

I felt the blood leave my face. "She wants to be one of them?"

He nodded once, his eyes sharp on my face, watching my reaction.

I shuddered. "How can she want that?" I whispered, more to myself than really looking for an answer. "How can she watch those people file through to that hideous room and want to be a part of that?"

Edward didn't answer. His expression twisted in response to something I'd said.

As I stared at his too beautiful face, trying to understand the change, it suddenly struck me that I was really here, in Edward's arms, however fleetingly, and that we were not—at this exact moment—about to be killed.

"Oh, Edward," I cried, and I was sobbing again. It was such a stupid reaction. The tears were too thick for me to see his face again, and that was inexcusable. I only had until sunset for sure. Like a fairy tale again, with deadlines that ended the magic.

"What's wrong?" he asked, still anxious, rubbing my back with gentle pats.

I wrapped my arms around his neck—what was the worst he could do? Just push me away—and hugged myself closer to him. "Is it really sick for me to be happy right now?" I asked. My voice broke twice.

He didn't push me away. He pulled me tight against his ice-hard chest, so tight it was hard to breathe, even with my lungs securely intact. "I know exactly what you mean," he whispered. "But we have lots of reasons to be happy. For one, we're alive."

"Yes," I agreed. "That's a good one."

"And together," he breathed. His breath was so sweet it made my head swim.

I just nodded, sure that he did not place the same weight on that consideration as I did.

"And, with any luck, we'll still be alive tomorrow."

"Hopefully," I said uneasily.

"The outlook is quite good," Alice assured me. She'd been so quiet, I'd almost forgotten her presence. "I'll see Jasper in less than twenty-four hours," she added in a satisfied tone.

Lucky Alice. She could trust her future.

I couldn't keep my eyes off of Edward's face for long. I stared at him, wishing more than anything that the future would never happen. That this moment would last forever, or, if it couldn't, that I would stop existing when it did.

Edward stared right back at me, his dark eyes soft, and it was easy to pretend that he felt the same way. So that's what I did. I pretended, to make the moment sweeter.

His fingertips traced the circles under my eyes. "You look so tired."

"And you look thirsty," I whispered back, studying the purple bruises under his black irises.

He shrugged. "It's nothing."

"Are you sure? I could sit with Alice," I offered, unwilling; I'd rather he killed me now than move one inch from where I was.

"Don't be ridiculous." He sighed; his sweet breath caressed my face. "I've never been in better control of that side of my nature than right now."

I had a million questions for him. One of them bubbled to my lips now, but I held my tongue. I didn't want to ruin the moment, as imperfect as it was, here in this room that made me sick, under the eyes of the would-be monster.

Here in his arms, it was so easy to fantasize that he wanted me. I didn't want to think about his motivations now—about whether he acted this way to keep me calm while we were still in danger, or if he just felt guilty for where we were and relieved that he wasn't responsible for my death. Maybe the time apart had been enough that I didn't bore him for the moment. But it didn't matter. I was so much happier pretending.

I lay quiet in his arms, re-memorizing his face, pretending....

He stared at my face like he was doing the same, while he and Alice discussed how to get home. Their voices were so quick and low that I knew Gianna couldn't understand. I missed half of it myself. It sounded like more theft would be involved, though. I wondered idly if the yellow Porsche had made it back to its owner yet.

"What was all that talk about singers?" Alice asked at one point.

"La tua cantante," Edward said. His voice made the words into music.

"Yes, that," Alice said, and I concentrated for a moment. I'd wondered about that, too, at the time.

I felt Edward shrug around me. “They have a name for someone who smells the way Bella does to me. They call her my singer—because her blood sings for me.”

Alice laughed.

I was tired enough to sleep, but I fought against the weariness. I wasn’t going to miss a second of the time I had with him. Now and then, as he talked with Alice, he would lean down suddenly and kiss me—his glass-smooth lips brushing against my hair, my forehead, the tip of my nose. Each time it was like an electric shock to my long dormant heart. The sound of its beating seemed to fill the entire room.

It was heaven—right smack in the middle of hell.

I lost track of the time completely. So when Edward’s arms tightened around me, and both he and Alice looked to the back of the room with wary eyes, I panicked. I cringed into Edward’s chest as Alec—his eyes now a vivid ruby, but still spotless in his light gray suit despite the afternoon meal—walked through the double doors.

It was good news.

“You’re free to leave now,” Alec told us, his tone so warm you’d think we were all lifelong friends. “We ask that you don’t linger in the city.”

Edward made no answering pretence; his voice was ice cold. “That won’t be a problem.”

Alec smiled, nodded, and disappeared again.

“Follow the right hallway around the corner to the first set of elevators,” Gianna told us as Edward

helped me to my feet. “The lobby is two floors down, and exits to the street. Goodbye, now,” she added pleasantly. I wondered if her competence would be enough to save her.

Alice shot her a dark look.

I was relieved there was another way out; I wasn’t sure if I could handle another tour through the underground.

We left through a tastefully luxurious lobby. I was the only one who glanced back at the medieval castle that housed the elaborate business façade. I couldn’t see the turret from here, for which I was grateful.

The party was still in full swing in the streets. The street lamps were just coming on as we walked swiftly through the narrow, cobbled lanes. The sky was a dull, fading gray overhead, but the buildings crowded the streets so closely that it felt darker.

The party was darker, too. Edward’s long, trailing cloak did not stand out in the way it might have on a normal evening in Volterra. There were others in black satin cloaks now, and the plastic fangs I’d seen on the child in the square today seemed to be very popular with the adults.

“Ridiculous,” Edward muttered once.

I didn’t notice when Alice disappeared from beside me. I looked over to ask her a question, and she was gone.

“Where’s Alice?” I whispered in a panic.

“She went to retrieve your bags from where she stashed them this morning.”

I'd forgotten that I had access to a toothbrush. It brightened my outlook considerably.

"She's stealing a car, too, isn't she?" I guessed.

He grinned. "Not till we're outside."

It seemed like a very long way to the entryway. Edward could see that I was spent; he wound his arm around my waist and supported most of my weight as we walked.

I shuddered as he pulled me through the dark stone archway. The huge, ancient portcullis above was like a cage door, threatening to drop on us, to lock us in.

He led me toward a dark car, waiting in a pool of shadow to the right of the gate with the engine running. To my surprise, he slid into the backseat with me, instead of insisting on driving.

Alice was apologetic. "I'm sorry." She gestured vaguely toward the dashboard. "There wasn't much to choose from."

"It's fine, Alice." He grinned. "They can't all be 911 Turbos."

She sighed. "I may have to acquire one of those legally. It was fabulous."

"I'll get you one for Christmas," Edward promised.

Alice turned to beam at him, which worried me, as she was already speeding down the dark and curvy hillside at the same time.

"Yellow," she told him.

Edward kept me tight in his arms. Inside the gray cloak, I was warm and comfortable. More than comfortable.

"You can sleep now, Bella," he murmured. "It's over."

I knew he meant the danger, the nightmare in the ancient city, but I still had to swallow hard before I could answer.

"I don't want to sleep. I'm not tired." Just the second part was a lie. I wasn't about to close my eyes. The car was only dimly lit by the dashboard controls, but it was enough that I could see his face.

He pressed his lips to the hollow under my ear. "Try," he encouraged.

I shook my head.

He sighed. "You're still just as stubborn."

I was stubborn; I fought with my heavy lids, and I won. The dark road was the hardest part; the bright lights at the airport in Florence made it easier, as did the chance to brush my teeth and change into clean clothes; Alice bought Edward new clothes, too, and he left the dark cloak on a pile of trash in an alley. The plane trip to Rome was so short that there wasn't really a chance for the fatigue to drag me under. I knew the flight from Rome to Atlanta would be another matter entirely, so I asked the flight attendant if she could bring me a Coke.

"Bella," Edward said disapprovingly. He knew my low tolerance for caffeine.

Alice was behind us. I could hear her murmuring to Jasper on the phone.

“I don’t want to sleep,” I reminded him. I gave him an excuse that was believable because it was true. “If I close my eyes now, I’ll see things I don’t want to see. I’ll have nightmares.”

He didn’t argue with me after that.

It would have been a very good time to talk, to get the answers I needed—needed but not really wanted; I was already despairing at the thought of what I might hear. We had an uninterrupted block of time ahead of us, and he couldn’t escape me on an airplane—well, not easily, at least. No one would hear us except Alice; it was late, and most of the passengers were turning off lights and asking for pillows in muted voices. Talk would help me fight off the exhaustion.

But, perversely, I bit my tongue against the flood of questions. My reasoning was probably flawed by exhaustion, but I hoped that by postponing the discussion, I could buy a few more hours with him at some later time—spin this out for another night, Scheherazade-style.

So I kept drinking soda, and resisting even the urge to blink. Edward seemed perfectly content to hold me in his arms, his fingers tracing my face again and again. I touched his face, too. I couldn’t stop myself, though I was afraid it would hurt me later, when I was alone again. He continued to kiss my hair, my forehead, my wrists…but never my lips, and that was good. After all, how many ways can one heart be mangled and still be expected to keep beating? I’d lived through a lot that should have finished me in the last few days, but it didn’t make me feel strong. Instead, I felt horribly fragile, like one word could shatter me.

Edward didn't speak. Maybe he was hoping I would sleep. Maybe he had nothing to say.

I won the fight against my heavy lids. I was awake when we reached the airport in Atlanta, and I even watched the sun beginning to rise over Seattle's cloud cover before Edward slid the window shut. I was proud of myself. I hadn't missed one minute.

Neither Alice nor Edward was surprised by the reception that waited for us at Sea-Tac airport, but it caught me off guard. Jasper was the first one I saw—he didn't seem to see me at all. His eyes were only for Alice. She went quickly to his side; they didn't embrace like other couples meeting there. They only stared into each other's faces, yet, somehow, the moment was so private that I still felt the need to look away.

Carlisle and Esme waited in a quiet corner far from the line for the metal detectors, in the shadow of a wide pillar. Esme reached for me, hugging me fiercely, yet awkwardly, because Edward kept his arms around me, too.

"Thank you so much," she said in my ear.

Then she threw her arms around Edward, and she looked like she would be crying if that were possible.

"You will never put me through that again," she nearly growled.

Edward grinned, repentant. "Sorry, Mom."

"Thank you, Bella," Carlisle said. "We owe you."

“Hardly,” I mumbled. The sleepless night was suddenly overpowering. My head felt disconnected from my body.

“She’s dead on her feet,” Esme scolded Edward. “Let’s get her home.”

Not sure if home was what I wanted at this point, I stumbled, half-blind, through the airport, Edward dragging me on one side and Esme on the other. I didn’t know if Alice and Jasper were behind us or not, and I was too exhausted to look.

I think I was mostly asleep, though I was still walking, when we reached their car. The surprise of seeing Emmett and Rosalie leaning against the black sedan under the dim lights of the parking garage revived me some. Edward stiffened.

“Don’t,” Esme whispered. “She feels awful.”

“She should,” Edward said, making no attempt to keep his voice down.

“It’s not her fault,” I said, my words garbled with exhaustion.

“Let her make amends,” Esme pleaded. “We’ll ride with Alice and Jasper.”

Edward glowered at the absurdly lovely blond vampire waiting for us.

“Please, Edward,” I said. I didn’t want to ride with Rosalie any more than he seemed to, but I’d caused more than enough discord in his family.

He sighed, and towed me toward the car.

Emmett and Rosalie got in the front seat without speaking, while Edward pulled me in the back again. I knew I wasn't going to be able to fight my eyelids anymore, and I laid my head against his chest in defeat, letting them close. I felt the car purr to life.

"Edward," Rosalie began.

"I know." Edward's brusque tone was not generous.

"Bella?" Rosalie asked softly.

My eyelids fluttered open in shock. It was the first time she'd ever spoken directly to me.

"Yes, Rosalie?" I asked, hesitant.

"I'm so very sorry, Bella. I feel wretched about every part of this, and so grateful that you were brave enough to go save my brother after what I did. Please say you'll forgive me."

The words were awkward, stilted because of her embarrassment, but they seemed sincere.

"Of course, Rosalie," I mumbled, grasping at any chance to make her hate me a little less. "It's not your fault at all. I'm the one who jumped off the damn cliff. Of course I forgive you."

The words came out like mush.

"It doesn't count until she's conscious, Rose," Emmett chuckled.

"I'm conscious," I said; it just sounded like a garbled sigh.

“Let her sleep,” Edward insisted, but his voice was a little warmer.

It was quiet then, except for the gentle thrum of the engine. I must have fallen asleep, because it seemed like seconds later when the door opened and Edward was carrying me from the car. My eyes wouldn’t open. At first I thought we were still at the airport.

And then I heard Charlie.

“Bella!” he shouted from some distance.

“Charlie,” I mumbled, trying to shake off the stupor.

“Shh,” Edward whispered. “It’s okay; you’re home and safe. Just sleep.”

“I can’t believe you have the nerve to show your face here.” Charlie bellowed at Edward, his voice much closer now.

“Stop it, Dad,” I groaned. He didn’t hear me.

“What’s wrong with her?” Charlie demanded.

“She’s just very tired, Charlie,” Edward assured him quietly. “Please let her rest.”

“Don’t tell me what to do!” Charlie yelled. “Give her to me. Get your hands off her!”

Edward tried to pass me to Charlie, but I clung to him with locked, tenacious fingers. I could feel my dad yanking on my arm.

“Cut it out, Dad,” I said with more volume. I managed to drag my lids back to stare at Charlie with bleary eyes. “Be mad at me.”

We were in front of my house. The front door was standing open. The cloud cover overhead was too thick to guess at a time of day.

“You bet I will be,” Charlie promised. “Get inside.”

“’Kay. Let me down,” I sighed.

Edward set me on my feet. I could see that I was upright, but I couldn’t feel my legs. I trudged forward anyway, until the sidewalk swirled up toward my face. Edward’s arms caught me before I hit the concrete.

“Just let me get her upstairs,” Edward said. “Then I’ll leave.”

“No,” I cried, panicking. I hadn’t got my answers yet. He had to stay for at least that much, didn’t he?

“I won’t be far,” Edward promised, whispering so low in my ear that Charlie didn’t have a hope of hearing.

I didn’t hear Charlie answer, but Edward headed into the house. My open eyes only made it till the stairs. The last thing I felt was Edward’s cool hands prying my fingers loose from his shirt.

# Chapter 23

## THE TRUTH

I had the sense that I'd been asleep for a very long time—my body was stiff, like I hadn't moved once through all that time, either. My mind was dazed and slow; strange, colorful dreams—dreams and nightmares—swirled dizzily around the inside of my head. They were so vivid. The horrible and the heavenly, all mixed together into a bizarre jumble. There was sharp impatience and fear, both part of that frustrating dream where your feet can't move fast enough....And there were plenty of monsters, red-eyed fiends that were all the more ghastly for their genteel civility. The dream was still strong—I could even remember the names. But the strongest, clearest part of the dream was not the horror. It was the angel that was most clear.

It was hard to let him go and wake up. This dream did not want to be shoved away into the vault of dreams I refused to revisit. I struggled with it as my mind became more alert, focusing on reality. I couldn't remember what day of the week it was, but I was sure Jacob or school or work or something was waiting for me. I inhaled deeply, wondering how to face another day.

Something cold touched my forehead with the softest pressure.

I squeezed my eyes more tightly shut. I was still dreaming, it seemed, and it felt abnormally real. I was so close to waking…any second now, and it would be gone.

But I realized that it felt too real, too real to be good for me. The stone arms I imagined wrapped around me were far too substantial. If I let this go any further, I'd be sorry for it later. With a resigned sigh, I wrenched back my eyelids to dispel the illusion.

"Oh!" I gasped, and threw my fists over my eyes.

Well, clearly, I'd gone too far; it must have been a mistake to let my imagination get so out of hand. Okay, so "let" was the wrong word. I'd forced it to get out of hand—pretty much stalked my hallucinations—and now my mind had snapped.

It took less than half a second for me to realize that, as long as I was truly insane now, I might as well enjoy the delusions while they were pleasant.

I opened my eyes again—and Edward was still there, his perfect face just inches away from mine.

"Did I frighten you?" His low voice was anxious.

This was very good, as delusions went. The face, the voice, the scent, everything—it was so much better than drowning. The beautiful figment of my imagination watched my changing expressions with alarm. His irises were pitch-black, with bruise-like shadows under them. This surprised me; my hallucinatory Edwards were usually better fed.

I blinked twice, desperately trying to remember the last thing that I was sure was real. Alice was part of my dream, and I wondered if she had really come back at all, or if that was just the preamble. I thought she'd returned the day I'd nearly drowned….

"Oh, crap," I croaked. My throat was thick with sleeping.

"What's wrong, Bella?"

I frowned at him unhappily. His face was even more anxious than before.

"I'm dead, right?" I moaned. "I did drown. Crap, crap, crap! This is gonna kill Charlie."

Edward frowned, too. "You're not dead."

"Then why am I not waking up?" I challenged, raising my eyebrows.

"You are awake, Bella."

I shook my head. "Sure, sure. That's what you want me to think. And then it will be worse when I do wake up. If I wake up, which I won't, because I'm dead. This is awful. Poor Charlie. And Reneé and Jake . . ." I trailed off in horror at what I had done.

"I can see where you might confuse me with a nightmare." His short-lived smile was grim. "But I can't imagine what you could have done to wind up in hell. Did you commit many murders while I was away?"

I grimaced. "Obviously not. If I was in hell, you wouldn't be with me."

He sighed.

My head was getting clearer. My eyes flickered away from his face—unwillingly—for one second, to the dark, open window, and then back to him. I started to remember details…and I felt a faint, unfamiliar blush warm the skin over my cheekbones as I slowly realized that Edward was really, truly here with me, and I was wasting time being an idiot.

“Did all of that really happen, then?” It was almost impossible to reassign my dream as reality. I couldn’t wrap my head around the concept.

“That depends.” Edward’s smile was still hard. “If you’re referring to us nearly being massacred in Italy, then, yes.”

“How strange,” I mused. “I really went to Italy. Did you know I’d never been farther east than Albuquerque?”

He rolled his eyes. “Maybe you should go back to sleep. You’re not coherent.”

“I’m not tired anymore.” It was all coming clear now. “What time is it? How long have I been sleeping?”

“It’s just after one in the morning. So, about fourteen hours.”

I stretched as he spoke. I was so stiff.

“Charlie?” I asked.

Edward frowned. “Sleeping. You should probably know that I’m breaking the rules right now. Well, not technically, since he said I was never to walk through his door again, and I came in the window….But, still, the intent was clear.”

“Charlie banned you from the house?” I asked, disbelief quickly melting into fury.

His eyes were sad. “Did you expect anything else?”

My eyes were mad. I was going to have a few words with my father—perhaps it would be a good time to remind him that I was over the legal age of adulthood.

It didn't matter so much, of course, except in principle. All too soon there would be no reason for the prohibition. I turned my thoughts to less painful avenues.

"What's the story?" I asked, genuinely curious, but also trying desperately to keep the conversation casual, to keep a firm grip on myself, so I wouldn't scare him away with the frantic, gnawing craving that was raging inside me.

"What do you mean?"

"What am I telling Charlie? What's my excuse for disappearing for…how long was I gone, anyway?" I tried to count the hours in my head.

"Just three days." His eyes tightened, but he smiled more naturally this time. "Actually, I was hoping you might have a good explanation. I've got nothing."

I groaned. "Fabulous."

"Well, maybe Alice will come up with something," he offered, trying to comfort me.

And I was comforted. Who cared what I had to deal with later? Every second that he was here—so close, his flawless face glowing in the dim light from the numbers on my alarm clock—was precious and not to be wasted.

"So," I began, picking the least important—though still vitally interesting—question to start with. I was safely delivered home, and he might decide to leave at any moment. I had to keep him talking. Besides, this temporary heaven wasn't entirely complete without the sound of his voice. "What have you been doing, up until three days ago?"

His face turned wary in an instant. “Nothing terribly exciting.”

“Of course not,” I mumbled.

“Why are you making that face?”

“Well . . .” I pursed my lips, considering. “If you were, after all, just a dream, that’s exactly the kind of thing you would say. My imagination must be used up.”

He sighed. “If I tell you, will you finally believe that you’re not having a nightmare?”

“Nightmare!” I repeated scornfully. He waited for my answer. “Maybe,” I said after a second of thought. “If you tell me.”

“I was…hunting.”

“Is that the best you can do?” I criticized. “That definitely doesn’t prove I’m awake.”

He hesitated, and then spoke slowly, choosing his words with care. “I wasn’t hunting for food…I was actually trying my hand at…tracking. I’m not very good at it.”

“What were you tracking?” I asked, intrigued.

“Nothing of consequence.” His words didn’t match his expression; he looked upset, uncomfortable.

“I don’t understand.”

He hesitated; his face, shining with an odd green cast from the light of the clock, was torn.

"I—" He took a deep breath. "I owe you an apology. No, of course I owe you much, much more than that. But you have to know"—the words began to flow so fast, the way I remembered he spoke sometimes when he was agitated, that I really had to concentrate to catch them all—"that I had no idea. I didn't realize the mess I was leaving behind. I thought it was safe for you here. So safe. I had no idea that Victoria"—his lips curled back when he said the name—"would come back. I'll admit, when I saw her that one time, I was paying much more attention to James's thoughts. But I just didn't see that she had this kind of response in her. That she even had such a tie to him. I think I realize why now—she was so sure of him, the thought of him failing never occurred to her. It was her overconfidence that clouded her feelings about him—that kept me from seeing the depth of them, the bond there.

"Not that there's any excuse for what I left you to face. When I heard what you told Alice—what she saw herself—when I realized that you had to put your life in the hands of werewolves, immature, volatile, the worst thing out there besides Victoria herself"—he shuddered and the gush of words halted for a short second. "Please know that I had no idea of any of this. I feel sick, sick to my core, even now, when I can see and feel you safe in my arms. I am the most miserable excuse for—"

"Stop," I interrupted him. He stared at me with agonized eyes, and I tried to find the right words—the words that would free him from this imagined obligation that caused him so much pain. They were very hard words to say. I didn't know if I could get them out without breaking down. But I had to try to do it right. I didn't want to be a source of guilt and anguish in his life. He should be happy, no matter what it cost me.

I'd really been hoping to put off this part of our last conversation. It was going to bring things to an end so much sooner.

Drawing on all my months of practice with trying to be normal for Charlie, I kept my face smooth.

"Edward," I said. His name burned my throat a little on the way out. I could feel the ghost of the hole, waiting to rip itself wide again as soon as he disappeared. I didn't quite see how I was going to survive it this time. "This has to stop now. You can't think about things that way. You can't let this…this guilt…rule your life. You can't take responsibility for the things that happen to me here. None of it is your fault, it's just part of how life is for me. So, if I trip in front of a bus or whatever it is next time, you have to realize that it's not your job to take the blame. You can't just go running off to Italy because you feel bad that you didn't save me. Even if I had jumped off that cliff to die, that would have been my choice, and not your fault. I know it's your…your nature to shoulder the blame for everything, but you really can't let that make you go to such extremes! It's very irresponsible—think of Esme and Carlisle and—"

I was on the edge of losing it. I stopped to take a deep breath, hoping to calm myself. I had to set him free. I had to make sure this never happened again.

"Isabella Marie Swan," he whispered, the strangest expression crossing his face. He almost looked mad. "Do you believe that I asked the Volturi to kill me because I felt guilty?"

I could feel the blank incomprehension on my face. "Didn't you?"

"Feel guilty? Intensely so. More than you can comprehend."

"Then…what are you saying? I don't understand."

"Bella, I went to the Volturi because I thought you were dead," he said, voice soft, eyes fierce. "Even if I'd had no hand in your death"—he shuddered as he whispered the last word—"even if it wasn't my fault, I would have gone to Italy. Obviously, I should have been more careful—I should have spoken to Alice directly, rather than accepting it secondhand from Rosalie. But, really, what was I supposed to think when the boy said Charlie was at the funeral? What are the odds?

"The odds…," he muttered then, distracted. His voice was so low I wasn't sure I heard it right. "The odds are always stacked against us. Mistake after mistake. I'll never criticize Romeo again."

"But I still don't understand," I said. "That's my whole point. So what?"

"Excuse me?"

"So what if I was dead?"

He stared at me dubiously for a long moment before answering. "Don't you remember anything I told you before?"

"I remember everything that you told me." Including the words that had negated all the rest.

He brushed the tip of his cool finger against my lower lip. "Bella, you seem to be under a misapprehension." He closed his eyes, shaking his head back and forth with half a smile on his beautiful face. It wasn't a

happy smile. “I thought I’d explained it clearly before. Bella, I can’t live in a world where you don’t exist.”

“I am . . .” My head swam as I looked for the appropriate word. “Confused.” That worked. I couldn’t make sense of what he was saying.

He stared deep into my eyes with his sincere, earnest gaze. “I’m a good liar, Bella, I have to be.”

I froze, my muscles locking down as if for impact. The fault line in my chest rippled; the pain of it took my breath away.

He shook my shoulder, trying to loosen my rigid pose. “Let me finish! I’m a good liar, but still, for you to believe me so quickly.” He winced. “That was…excruciating.”

I waited, still frozen.

“When we were in the forest, when I was telling you goodbye—”

I didn’t allow myself to remember. I fought to keep myself in the present second only.

“You weren’t going to let go,” he whispered. “I could see that. I didn’t want to do it—it felt like it would kill me to do it—but I knew that if I couldn’t convince you that I didn’t love you anymore, it would just take you that much longer to get on with your life. I hoped that, if you thought I’d moved on, so would you.”

“A clean break,” I whispered through unmoving lips.

“Exactly. But I never imagined it would be so easy to do! I thought it would be next to impossible—that you would be so sure of the truth that I would have to lie

through my teeth for hours to even plant the seed of doubt in your head. I lied, and I'm so sorry—sorry because I hurt you, sorry because it was a worthless effort. Sorry that I couldn't protect you from what I am. I lied to save you, and it didn't work. I'm sorry.

"But how could you believe me? After all the thousand times I've told you I love you, how could you let one word break your faith in me?"

I didn't answer. I was too shocked to form a rational response.

"I could see it in your eyes, that you honestly believed that I didn't want you anymore. The most absurd, ridiculous concept—as if there were any way that I could exist without needing you!"

I was still frozen. His words were incomprehensible, because they were impossible.

He shook my shoulder again, not hard, but enough that my teeth rattled a little.

"Bella," he sighed. "Really, what were you thinking!"

And so I started to cry. The tears welled up and then gushed miserably down my cheeks.

"I knew it," I sobbed. "I knew I was dreaming."

"You're impossible," he said, and he laughed once—a hard laugh, frustrated. "How can I put this so that you'll believe me? You're not asleep, and you're not dead. I'm here, and I love you. I have always loved you, and I will always love you. I was thinking of you, seeing your face in my mind, every second that I was away. When I told you that I didn't want you, it was the very blackest kind of blasphemy."

I shook my head while the tears continued to ooze from the corners of my eyes.

“You don’t believe me, do you?” he whispered, his face paler than his usual pale—I could see that even in the dim light. “Why can you believe the lie, but not the truth?”

“It never made sense for you to love me,” I explained, my voice breaking twice. “I always knew that.”

His eyes narrowed, his jaw tightened.

“I’ll prove you’re awake,” he promised.

He caught my face securely between his iron hands,ignoring my struggles when I tried to turn my head away.

“Please don’t,” I whispered.

He stopped, his lips just half an inch from mine.

“Why not?” he demanded. His breath blew into my face, making my head whirl.

“When I wake up”—He opened his mouth to protest, so I revised—“okay, forget that one—when you leave again, it’s going to be hard enough without this, too.”

He pulled back an inch, to stare at my face.

“Yesterday, when I would touch you, you were so…hesitant, so careful, and yet still the same. I need to know why. Is it because I’m too late? Because I’ve hurt you too much? Because you have moved on, as I meant for you to? That would be…quite fair. I won’t contest your decision. So don’t try to spare my feelings, please—just tell me now whether or not you

can still love me, after everything I've done to you. Can you?" he whispered.

"What kind of an idiotic question is that?"

"Just answer it. Please."

I stared at him darkly for a long moment. "The way I feel about you will never change. Of course I love you—and there's nothing you can do about it!"

"That's all I needed to hear."

His mouth was on mine then, and I couldn't fight him. Not because he was so many thousand times stronger than me, but because my will crumbled into dust the second our lips met. This kiss was not quite as careful as others I remembered, which suited me just fine. If I was going to rip myself up further, I might as well get as much in trade as possible.

So I kissed him back, my heart pounding out a jagged, disjointed rhythm while my breathing turned to panting and my fingers moved greedily to his face. I could feel his marble body against every line of mine, and I was so glad he hadn't listened to me—there was no pain in the world that would have justified missing this. His hands memorized my face, the same way mine were tracing his, and, in the brief seconds when his lips were free, he whispered my name.

When I was starting to get dizzy, he pulled away, only to lay his ear against my heart.

I lay there, dazed, waiting for my gasping to slow and quiet.

"By the way," he said in a casual tone. "I'm not leaving you."

I didn't say anything, and he seemed to hear skepticism in my silence.

He lifted his face to lock my gaze in his. "I'm not going anywhere. Not without you," he added more seriously. "I only left you in the first place because I wanted you to have a chance at a normal, happy, human life. I could see what I was doing to you—keeping you constantly on the edge of danger, taking you away from the world you belonged in, risking your life every moment I was with you. So I had to try. I had to do something, and it seemed like leaving was the only way. If I hadn't thought you would be better off, I could have never made myself leave. I'm much too selfish. Only you could be more important than what I wanted…what I needed. What I want and need is to be with you, and I know I'll never be strong enough to leave again. I have too many excuses to stay—thank heaven for that! It seems you can't be safe, no matter how many miles I put between us."

"Don't promise me anything," I whispered. If I let myself hope, and it came to nothing…that would kill me. Where all those merciless vampires had not been able to finish me off, hope would do the job.

Anger glinted metallic in his black eyes. "You think I'm lying to you now?"

"No—not lying." I shook my head, trying to think it through coherently. To examine the hypothesis that he did love me, while staying objective, clinical, so I wouldn't fall into the trap of hoping. "You could mean it…now. But what about tomorrow, when you think about all the reasons you left in the first place? Or next month, when Jasper takes a snap at me?"

He flinched.

I thought back over those last days of my life before he left me, tried to see them through the filter of what he was telling me now. From that perspective, imagining that he'd left me while loving me, left me for me, his brooding and cold silences took on a different meaning. "It isn't as if you hadn't thought the first decision through, is it?" I guessed. "You'll end up doing what you think is right."

"I'm not as strong as you give me credit for," he said. "Right and wrong have ceased to mean much to me; I was coming back anyway. Before Rosalie told me the news, I was already past trying to live through one week at a time, or even one day. I was fighting to make it through a single hour. It was only a matter of time—and not much of it—before I showed up at your window and begged you to take me back. I'd be happy to beg now, if you'd like that."

I grimaced. "Be serious, please."

"Oh, I am," he insisted, glaring now. "Will you please try to hear what I'm telling you? Will you let me attempt to explain what you mean to me?"

He waited, studying my face as he spoke to make sure I was really listening.

"Before you, Bella, my life was like a moonless night. Very dark, but there were stars—points of light and reason….And then you shot across my sky like a meteor. Suddenly everything was on fire; there was brilliancy, there was beauty. When you were gone, when the meteor had fallen over the horizon, everything went black. Nothing had changed, but my eyes were blinded by the light. I couldn't see the stars anymore. And there was no more reason for anything."

I wanted to believe him. But this was my life without him that he was describing, not the other way around.

"Your eyes will adjust," I mumbled.

"That's just the problem—they can't."

"What about your distractions?"

He laughed without a trace of humor. "Just part of the lie, love. There was no distraction from the…the agony. My heart hasn't beat in almost ninety years, but this was different. It was like my heart was gone—like I was hollow. Like I'd left everything that was inside me here with you."

"That's funny," I muttered.

He arched one perfect eyebrow. "Funny?"

"I meant strange—I thought it was just me. Lots of pieces of me went missing, too. I haven't been able to really breathe in so long." I filled my lungs, luxuriating in the sensation. "And my heart. That was definitely lost."

He closed his eyes and laid his ear over my heart again. I let my cheek press against his hair, felt the texture of it on my skin, smelled the delicious scent of him.

"Tracking wasn't a distraction then?" I asked, curious, and also needing to distract myself. I was very much in danger of hoping. I wouldn't be able to stop myself for long. My heart throbbed, singing in my chest.

"No." He sighed. "That was never a distraction. It was an obligation."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that, even though I never expected any danger from Victoria, I wasn't going to let her get away with…Well, like I said, I was horrible at it. I traced her as far as Texas, but then I followed a false lead down to Brazil—and really she came here." He groaned. "I wasn't even on the right continent! And all the while, worse than my worst fears—"

"You were hunting Victoria?" I half-shrieked as soon as I could find my voice, shooting through two octaves.

Charlie's distant snores stuttered, and then picked up a regular rhythm again.

"Not well," Edward answered, studying my outraged expression with a confused look. "But I'll do better this time. She won't be tainting perfectly good air by breathing in and out for much longer."

"That is…out of the question," I managed to choke out. Insanity. Even if he had Emmett or Jasper help him. Even if he had Emmett and Jasper help. It was worse than my other imaginings: Jacob Black standing across a small space from Victoria's vicious and feline figure. I couldn't bear to picture Edward there, even though he was so much more durable than my half-human best friend.

"It's too late for her. I might have let the other time slide, but not now, not after—"

I interrupted him again, trying to sound calm. "Didn't you just promise that you weren't going to leave?" I

asked, fighting the words as I said them, not letting them plant themselves in my heart. "That isn't exactly compatible with an extended tracking expedition, is it?"

He frowned. A snarl began to build low in his chest. "I will keep my promise, Bella. But Victoria"—the snarl became more pronounced—"is going to die. Soon."

"Let's not be hasty," I said, trying to hide my panic. "Maybe she's not coming back. Jake's pack probably scared her off. There's really no reason to go looking for her. Besides, I've got bigger problems than Victoria."

Edward's eyes narrowed, but he nodded. "It's true. The werewolves are a problem."

I snorted. "I wasn't talking about Jacob. My problems are a lot worse that a handful of adolescent wolves getting themselves into trouble."

Edward looked as if he were about to say something, and then thought better of it. His teeth clicked together, and he spoke through them. "Really?" he asked. "Then what would be your greatest problem? That would make Victoria's returning for you seem like such an inconsequential matter in comparison?"

"How about the second greatest?" I hedged.

"All right," he agreed, suspicious.

I paused. I wasn't sure I could say the name. "There are others who are coming to look for me," I reminded him in a subdued whisper.

He sighed, but the reaction was not as strong as I would have imagined after his response to Victoria.

"The Volturi are only the second greatest?"

"You don't seem that upset about it," I noted.

"Well, we have plenty of time to think it through. Time means something very different to them than it does to you, or even me. They count years the way you count days. I wouldn't be surprised if you were thirty before you crossed their minds again," he added lightly.

Horror washed through me.

Thirty.

So his promises meant nothing, in the end. If I were going to turn thirty someday, then he couldn't be planning on staying long. The harsh pain of this knowledge made me realize that I'd already begun to hope, without giving myself permission to do so.

"You don't have to be afraid," he said, anxious as he watched the tears dew up again on the rims of my eyes. "I won't let them hurt you."

"While you're here." Not that I cared what happened to me when he left.

He took my face between his two stone hands, holding it tightly while his midnight eyes glared into mine with the gravitational force of a black hole. "I will never leave you again."

"But you said thirty," I whispered. The tears leaked over the edge. "What? You're going to stay, but let me get all old anyway? Right."

His eyes softened, while his mouth went hard. "That's exactly what I'm going to do. What choice have I? I

cannot be without you, but I will not destroy your soul."

"Is this really . . ." I tried to keep my voice even, but this question was too hard. I remembered his face when Aro had almost begged him to consider making me immortal. The sick look there. Was this fixation with keeping me human really about my soul, or was it because he wasn't sure that he wanted me around that long?

"Yes?" he asked, waiting for my question.

I asked a different one. Almost—but not quite—as hard.

"But what about when I get so old that people think I'm your mother? Your grandmother?" My voice was pale with revulsion—I could see Gran's face again in the dream mirror.

His whole face was soft now. He brushed the tears from my cheek with his lips. "That doesn't mean anything to me," he breathed against my skin. "You will always be the most beautiful thing in my world. Of course . . ." He hesitated, flinching slightly. you outgrew me—if you wanted something more—I would understand that, Bella. I promise I wouldn't stand in your way if you wanted to leave me."

His eyes were liquid onyx and utterly sincere. He spoke as if he'd put endless amounts of thought into this asinine plan.

"You do realize that I'll die eventually, right?" I demanded.

He'd thought about this part, too. "I'll follow after as soon as I can."

"That is seriously . . ." I looked for the right word. "Sick."

"Bella, it's the only right way left—"

"Let's just back up for a minute," I said; feeling angry made it so much easier to be clear, decisive. "You do remember the Volturi, right? I can't stay human forever. They'll kill me. Even if they don't think of me till I'm thirty"—I hissed the word—"do you really think they'll forget?"

"No," he answered slowly, shaking his head. "They won't forget. But . . ."

"But?"

He grinned while I stared at him warily. Maybe I wasn't the only crazy one.

"I have a few plans."

"And these plans," I said, my voice getting more acidic with each word. "These plans all center around me staying human."

My attitude hardened his expression. "Naturally." His tone was brusque, his divine face arrogant.

We glowered at each other for a long minute.

Then I took a deep breath, squared my shoulders, I pushed his arms away so that I could sit up.

"Do you want me to leave?" he asked, and it made my heart flutter to see that this idea hurt him, though he tried not to show it.

"No," I told him. "I'm leaving."

He watched me suspiciously as I climbed out of the bed and fumbled around in the dark room, looking for my shoes.

“May I ask where you are going?” he asked.

“I’m going to your house,” I told him, still feeling around blindly.

He got up and came to my side. “Here are your shoes. How did you plan to get there?”

“My truck.”

“That will probably wake Charlie,” he offered as a deterrent.

I sighed. “I know. But honestly, I’ll be grounded for weeks as it is. How much more trouble can I really get in?”

“None. He’ll blame me, not you.”

“If you have a better idea, I’m all ears.”

“Stay here,” he suggested, but his expression wasn’t hopeful.

“No dice. But you go ahead and make yourself at home,” I encouraged, surprised at how natural my teasing sounded, and headed for the door.

He was there before me, blocking my way.

I frowned, and turned for the window. It wasn’t really that far to the ground, and it was mostly grass beneath....

“Okay,” he sighed. “I’ll give you a ride.”

I shrugged. “Either way. But you probably should be there, too.”

“And why is that?”

“Because you’re extraordinarily opinionated, and I’m sure you’ll want a chance to air your views.”

“My views on which subject?” He asked through his teeth.

“This isn’t just about you anymore. You’re not the center of the universe, you know.” My own personal universe was, of course, a different story. “If you’re going to bring the Volturi down on us over something as stupid as leaving me human, then your family ought to have a say.”

“A say in what?” he asked, each word distinct.

“My mortality. I’m putting it to a vote.”

# Chapter 24

## VOTE

He was not pleased, that much was easy to read in his face. But, without further argument, he took me in his arms and sprang lithely from my window, landing without the slightest jolt, like a cat. It was a little bit farther down than I'd imagined.

"All right then," he said, his voice seething with disapproval. "Up you go."

He helped me onto his back, and took off running. Even after all this time, it felt routine. Easy. Evidently this was something you never forgot, like riding a bicycle.

It was so very quiet and dark as he ran through the forest, his breathing slow and even—dark enough that the trees flying past us were nearly invisible, and only the rush of air in my face truly gave away our speed. The air was damp; it didn't burn my eyes the way the wind in the big plaza had, and that was comforting. As was the night, too, after that terrifying brightness. Like the thick quilt I'd played under as a child, the dark felt familiar and protecting.

I remembered that running through the forest like this used to frighten me, that I used to have to close my eyes. It seemed a silly reaction to me now. I kept my eyes wide, my chin resting on his shoulder, my cheek against his neck. The speed was exhilarating. A hundred times better than the motorcycle.

I turned my face toward him and pressed my lips into the cold stone skin of his neck.

"Thank you," he said, as the vague, black shapes of trees raced past us. "Does that mean you've decided you're awake?"

I laughed. The sound was easy, natural, effortless. It sounded right. "Not really. More that, either way, I'm not trying to wake up. Not tonight."

"I'll earn your trust back somehow," he murmured, mostly to himself. "If it's my final act."

"I trust you," I assured him. "It's me I don't trust."

"Explain that, please."

He'd slowed to a walk—I could only tell because the wind ceased—and I guessed that we weren't far from the house. In fact, I thought I could make out the sound of the river rushing somewhere close by in the darkness.

"Well—" I struggled to find the right way to phrase it. "I don't trust myself to be…enough. To deserve you. There's nothing about me that could hold you."

He stopped and reached around to pull me from his back. His gentle hands did not release me; after he'd set me on my feet again, he wrapped his arms tightly around me, hugging me to his chest.

"Your hold is permanent and unbreakable," he whispered. "Never doubt that."

But how could I not?

"You never did tell me…," he murmured.

"What?"

"What your greatest problem is."

"I'll give you one guess." I sighed, and reached up to touch the tip of his nose with my index finger.

He nodded. "I'm worse than the Volturi," he said grimly. "I guess I've earned that."

I rolled my eyes. "The worst the Volturi can do is kill me."

He waited with tense eyes.

"You can leave me," I explained. "The Volturi, Victoria…they're nothing compared to that."

Even in the darkness, I could see the anguish twist his face—it reminded me of his expression under Jane's torturing gaze; I felt sick, and regretted speaking the truth.

"Don't," I whispered, touching his face. "Don't be sad."

He pulled one corner of his mouth up halfheartedly, but the expression didn't touch his eyes. "If there was only some way to make you see that I can't leave you," he whispered. "Time, I suppose, will be the way to convince you."

I liked the idea of time. "Okay," I agreed.

His face was still tormented. I tried to distract him with inconsequentials.

"So—since you're staying. Can I have my stuff back?" I asked, making my tone as light as I could manage.

My attempt worked, to an extent: he laughed. But his eyes retained the misery. "Your things were never gone," he told me. "I knew it was wrong, since I promised you peace without reminders. It was stupid and childish, but I wanted to leave something of myself with you. The CD, the pictures, the tickets—they're all under your floorboards."

"Really?"

He nodded, seeming slightly cheered by my obvious pleasure in this trivial fact. It wasn't enough to heal the pain in his face completely.

"I think," I said slowly, "I'm not sure, but I wonder… I think maybe I knew it the whole time."

"What did you know?"

I only wanted to take away the agony in his eyes, but as I spoke the words, they sounded truer than I expected they would.

"Some part of me, my subconscious maybe, never stopped believing that you still cared whether I lived or died. That's probably why I was hearing the voices."

There was a very deep silence for a moment. "Voices?" he asked flatly.

"Well, just one voice. Yours. It's a long story." The wary look on his face made me wish that I hadn't brought that up. Would he think I was crazy, like everyone else? Was everyone else right about that? But at least that expression—the one that made him look like something was burning him—faded.

"I've got time." His voice was unnaturally even.

"It's pretty pathetic."

He waited.

I wasn't sure how to explain. "Do you remember what Alice said about extreme sports?"

He spoke the words without inflection or emphasis. "You jumped off a cliff for fun."

"Er, right. And before that, with the motorcycle—"

"Motorcycle?" he asked. I knew his voice well enough to hear something brewing behind the calm.

"I guess I didn't tell Alice about that part."

"No."

"Well, about that…See, I found that…when I was doing something dangerous or stupid…I could remember you more clearly," I confessed, feeling completely mental. "I could remember how your voice sounded when you were angry. I could hear it, like you were standing right there next to me. Mostly I tried not to think about you, but this didn't hurt so much—it was like you were protecting me again. Like you didn't want me to be hurt.

"And, well, I wonder if the reason I could hear you so clearly was because, underneath it all, I always knew that you hadn't stopped loving me."

Again, as I spoke, the words brought with them a sense of conviction. Of rightness. Some deep place inside me recognized truth.

His words came out half-strangled. "You…were…risking your life…to hear—"

“Shh,” I interrupted him. “Hold on a second. I think I’m having an epiphany here.”

I thought of that night in Port Angeles when I’d had my first delusion. I’d come up with two options. Insanity or wish fulfillment. I’d seen no third option.

But what if…

What if you sincerely believed something was true, but you were dead wrong? What if you were so stubbornly sure that you were right, that you wouldn’t even consider the truth? Would the truth be silenced, or would it try to break through?

Option three: Edward loved me. The bond forged between us was not one that could be broken by absence, distance, or time. And no matter how much more special or beautiful or brilliant or perfect than me he might be,he was as irreversibly altered as I was. As I would always belong to him, so would he always be mine.

Was that what I’d been trying to tell myself?

“Oh!”

“Bella?”

“Oh. Okay. I see.”

“Your epiphany?” he asked, his voice uneven and strained.

“You love me,” I marveled. The sense of conviction and rightness washed through me again.

Though his eyes were still anxious, the crooked smile I loved best flashed across his face. “Truly, I do.”

My heart inflated like it was going to crack right through my ribs. It filled my chest and blocked my throat so that I could not speak.

He really did want me the way I wanted him—forever. It was only fear for my soul, for the human things he didn't want to take from me, that made him so desperate to leave me mortal. Compared to the fear that he didn't want me, this hurdle—my soul—seemed almost insignificant.

He took my face tightly between his cool hands and kissed me until I was so dizzy the forest was spinning. Then he leaned his forehead against mine, and I was not the only one breathing harder than usual.

"You were better at it than I was, you know," he told me.

"Better at what?"

"Surviving. You, at least, made an effort. You got up in the morning, tried to be normal for Charlie, followed the pattern of your life. When I wasn't actively tracking, I was…totally useless. I couldn't be around my family—I couldn't be around anyone. I'm embarrassed to admit that I more or less curled up into a ball and let the misery have me." He grinned, sheepish. "It was much more pathetic than hearing voices. And, of course, you know I do that, too."

I was deeply relieved that he really seemed to understand—comforted that this all made sense to him. At any rate, he wasn't looking at me like I was crazy. He was looking at me like…he loved me.

"I only heard one voice," I corrected him.

He laughed and then pulled me tight against his right side and started to lead me forward.

"I'm just humoring you with this." He motioned broadly with his hand toward the darkness in front of us as we walked. There was something pale and immense there—the house, I realized. "It doesn't matter in the slightest what they say."

"This affects them now, too."

He shrugged indifferently.

He led me through the open front door into the dark house and flipped the lights on. The room was just as I'd remembered it—the piano and the white couches and the pale, massive staircase. No dust, no white sheets.

Edward called out the names with no more volume than I'd use in regular conversation. "Carlisle? Esme? Rosalie? Emmett? Jasper? Alice?" They would hear.

Carlisle was suddenly standing beside me, as if he'd been there all along. "Welcome back, Bella." He smiled. "What can we do for you this morning? I imagine, due to the hour, that this is not a purely social visit?"

I nodded. "I'd like to talk to everyone at once, if that's okay. About something important."

I couldn't help glancing up at Edward's face as I spoke. His expression was critical, but resigned. When I looked back to Carlisle, he was looking at Edward, too.

"Of course," Carlisle said. "Why don't we talk in the other room?"

Carlisle led the way through the bright living room, around the corner to the dining room, turning on lights as he went. The walls were white, the ceilings high, like the living room. In the center of the room, under the low-hanging chandelier, was a large, polished oval table surrounded by eight chairs. Carlisle held out a chair for me at the head.

I'd never seen the Cullens use the dining room table before—it was just a prop. They didn't eat in the house.

As soon as I turned to sit in the chair, I saw that we were not alone. Esme had followed Edward, and behind her the rest of the family filed in.

Carlisle sat down on my right, and Edward on my left. Everyone else took their seats in silence. Alice was grinning at me, already in on the plot. Emmett and Jasper looked curious, and Rosalie smiled at me tentatively. My answering smile was just as timid. That was going to take some getting used to.

Carlisle nodded toward me. "The floor is yours."

I swallowed. Their gazing eyes made me nervous. Edward took my hand under the table. I peeked at him, but he was watching the others, his face suddenly fierce.

"Well," I paused. "I'm hoping Alice has already told you everything that happened in Volterra?"

"Everything," Alice assured me.

I threw her a meaningful look. "And on the way?"

"That, too," she nodded.

"Good," I sighed with relief. "Then we're all on the same page."

They waited patiently while I tried to order my thoughts.

"So, I have a problem," I began. "Alice promised the Volturi that I would become one of you. They're going to send someone to check, and I'm sure that's a bad thing—something to avoid.

"And so, now, this involves you all. I'm sorry about that." I looked at each one of their beautiful faces, saving the most beautiful for last. Edward's mouth was turned down into a grimace. "But, if you don't want me, then I'm not going to force myself on you, whether Alice is willing or not."

Esme opened her mouth to speak, but I held up one finger to stop her.

"Please, let me finish. You all know what I want. And I'm sure you know what Edward thinks, too. I think the only fair way to decide is for everyone to have a vote. If you decide you don't want me, then…I guess I'll go back to Italy alone. I can't have them coming here." My forehead creased as I considered that.

There was the faint rumble of a growl in Edward's chest. I ignored him.

"Taking into account, then, that I won't put any of you in danger either way, I want you to vote yes or no on the issue of me becoming a vampire."

I half-smiled on the last word, and gestured toward Carlisle to begin.

"Just a minute," Edward interrupted.

I glared at him through narrowed eyes. He raised his eyebrows at me, squeezing my hand.

“I have something to add before we vote.”

I sighed.

“About the danger Bella’s referring to,” he continued. “I don’t think we need to be overly anxious.”

His expression became more animated. He put his free hand on the shining table and leaned forward.

“You see,” he explained, looking around the table while he spoke, “there was more than one reason why I didn’t want to shake Aro’s hand there at the end. There’s something they didn’t think of, and I didn’t want to clue them in.” He grinned.

“Which was?” Alice prodded. I was sure my expression was just as skeptical as hers.

“The Volturi are overconfident, and with good reason. When they decide to find someone, it’s not really a problem. Do you remember Demetri?” He glanced down at me.

I shuddered. He took that as a yes.

“He finds people—that’s his talent, why they keep him.

“Now, the whole time we were with any of them, I was picking their brains for anything that might save us, getting as much information as possible. So I saw how Demetri’s talent works. He’s a tracker—a tracker a thousand times more gifted than James was. His ability is loosely related to what I do, or what Aro does. He catches the…flavor? I don’t know how to

describe it…the tenor…of someone's mind, and then he follows that. It works over immense distances.

"But after Aro's little experiments, well . . ." Edward shrugged.

"You think he won't be able to find me," I said flatly.

He was smug. "I'm sure of it. He relies totally on that other sense. When it doesn't work with you, they'll all be blind."

"And how does that solve anything?"

"Quite obviously, Alice will be able to tell when they're planning a visit, and I'll hide you. They'll be helpless," he said with fierce enjoyment. "It will be like looking for a piece of straw in a haystack!"

He and Emmett exchanged a glance and a smirk.

This made no sense. "But they can find you," I reminded him.

"And I can take care of myself."

Emmett laughed, and reached across the table toward his brother, extending a fist.

"Excellent plan, my brother," he said with enthusiasm.

Edward stretched out his arm to smack Emmett's fist with his own.

"No," Rosalie hissed.

"Absolutely not," I agreed.

“Nice.” Jasper’s voice was appreciative.

“Idiots,” Alice muttered.

Esme just glared at Edward.

I straightened up in my chair, focusing. This was my meeting.

“All right, then. Edward has offered an alternative for you to consider,” I said coolly. “Let’s vote.”

I looked toward Edward this time; it would be better to get his opinion out of the way. “Do you want me to join your family?”

His eyes were hard and black as flint. “Not that way. You’re staying human.”

I nodded once, keeping my face businesslike, and then moved on.

“Alice?”

“Yes.”

“Jasper?”

“Yes,” he said, voice grave. I was a little surprised—I hadn’t been at all sure of his vote—but I suppressed my reaction and moved on.

“Rosalie?”

She hesitated, biting down on her full, perfect bottom lip. “No.”

I kept my face blank and turned my head slightly to move on, but she held up both her hands, palms forward.

“Let me explain,” she pleaded. “I don’t mean that I have any aversion to you as a sister. It’s just that…this is not the life I would have chosen for myself. I wish there had been someone there to vote no for me.”

I nodded slowly, and then turned to Emmett.

“Hell, yes!” He grinned. “We can find some other way to pick a fight with this Demetri.”

I was still grimacing at that when I looked at Esme.

“Yes, of course, Bella. I already think of you as part of my family.”

“Thank you, Esme,” I murmured as I turned toward Carlisle.

I was suddenly nervous, wishing I had asked for his vote first. I was sure that this was the vote that mattered most, the vote that counted more than any majority.

Carlisle wasn’t looking at me.

“Edward,” he said.

“No,” Edward growled. His jaw was strained tight, his lips curled back from his teeth.

“It’s the only way that makes sense,” Carlisle insisted. “You’ve chosen not to live without her, and that doesn’t leave me a choice.”

Edward dropped my hand, shoving away from the table. He stalked out of the room, snarling under his breath.

“I guess you know my vote.” Carlisle sighed.

I was still staring after Edward. “Thanks,” I mumbled.

An earsplitting crash echoed from the other room.

I flinched, and spoke quickly. “That’s all I needed. Thank you. For wanting to keep me. I feel exactly the same way about all of you, too.” My voice was jagged with emotion by the end.

Esme was at my side in a flash, her cold arms around me.

“Dearest Bella,” she breathed.

I hugged her back. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Rosalie looking down at the table, and I realized that my words could be construed in two ways.

“Well, Alice,” I said when Esme released me. “Where do you want to do this?”

Alice stared at me, her eyes widening with terror.

“No! No! NO!” Edward roared, charging back into the room. He was in my face before I had time to blink, bending over me, his expression twisted in rage. “Are you insane?” he shouted. “Have you utterly lost your mind?”

I cringed away, my hands over my ears.

"Um, Bella," Alice interjected in an anxious voice. "I don't think I'm ready for that. I'll need to prepare…."

"You promised," I reminded her, glaring under Edward's arm.

"I know, but…Seriously, Bella! I don't have any idea how to not kill you."

"You can do it," I encouraged. "I trust you."

Edward snarled in fury.

Alice shook her head quickly, looking panicked.

"Carlisle?" I turned to look at him.

Edward grabbed my face in his hand, forcing me to look at him. His other hand was out, palm toward Carlisle.

Carlisle ignored that. "I'm able to do it," he answered my question. I wished I could see his expression. "You would be in no danger of me losing control."

"Sounds good." I hoped he could understand; it was hard to talk clearly the way Edward held my jaw.

"Hold on," Edward said between his teeth. "It doesn't have to be now."

"There's no reason for it not to be now," I said, the words coming out distorted.

"I can think of a few."

"Of course you can," I said sourly. "Now let go of me."

He freed my face, and folded his arms across his chest. “In about two hours, Charlie will be here looking for you. I wouldn’t put it past him to involve the police.”

“All three of them.” But I frowned.

This was always the hardest part. Charlie, Reneé. Now Jacob, too. The people I would lose, the people I would hurt. I wished there was some way that I could be the only one to suffer, but I knew that was impossible.

At the same time, I was hurting them more by staying human. Putting Charlie in constant danger through my proximity. Putting Jake in worse danger still by drawing his enemies across the land he felt bound to protect. And Reneé—I couldn’t even risk a visit to see my own mother for fear of bringing my deadly problems along with me!

I was a danger magnet; I’d accepted that about myself.

Accepting this, I knew I needed to be able to take care of myself and protect the ones I loved, even if that meant that I couldn’t be with them. I needed to be strong.

“In the interest of remaining inconspicuous,” Edward said, still talking through his gritted teeth, but looking at Carlisle now, “I suggest that we put this conversation off, at the very least until Bella finishes high school, and moves out of Charlie’s house.”

“That’s a reasonable request, Bella,” Carlisle pointed out.

I thought about Charlie's reaction when he woke up this morning, if—after all that life had put him through in the last week with Harry's loss, and then I had put him through with my unexplained disappearance—he were to find my bed empty. Charlie deserved better than that. It was just a little more time; graduation wasn't so far away…

I pursed my lips. "I'll consider it."

Edward relaxed. His jaw unclenched.

"I should probably take you home," he said, more calm now, but clearly in a hurry to get me out of here. "Just in case Charlie wakes up early."

I looked at Carlisle. "After graduation?"

"You have my word."

I took a deep breath, smiled, and turned back to Edward. "Okay. You can take me home."

Edward rushed me out of the house before Carlisle could promise me anything else. He took me out the back, so I didn't get to see what was broken in the living room.

It was a quiet trip home. I was feeling triumphant, and a little smug. Scared stiff, too, of course, but I tried not to think about that part. It did me no good to worry about the pain—the physical or the emotional—so I wouldn't. Not until I absolutely had to.

When we got to my house, Edward didn't pause. He dashed up the wall and through my window in half a second. Then he pulled my arms from around his neck and set me on the bed.

I thought I had a pretty good idea of what he was thinking, but his expression surprised me. Instead of furious, it was calculating. He paced silently back and forth across my dark room while I watched with growing suspicion.

"Whatever you're planning, it's not going to work," I told him.

"Shh. I'm thinking."

"Ugh," I groaned, throwing myself back on the bed and pulling the quilt over my head.

There was no sound, but suddenly he was there. He flipped the cover back so he could see me. He was lying next to me. His hand reached up to brush my hair from my cheek.

"If you don't mind, I'd much rather you didn't hide your face. I've lived without it for as long as I can stand. Now…tell me something."

"What?" I asked, unwilling.

"If you could have anything in the world, anything at all, what would it be?"

I could feel the skepticism in my eyes. "You."

He shook his head impatiently. "Something you don't already have."

I wasn't sure where he was trying to lead me, so I thought carefully before I answered. I came up with something that was both true, and also probably impossible.

"I would want…Carlisle not to have to do it. I would want you to change me."

I watched his reaction warily, expecting more of the fury I'd seen at his house. I was surprised that his expression didn't change. It was still calculating, thoughtful.

"What would you be willing to trade for that?"

I couldn't believe my ears. I gawked at his composed face and blurted out the answer before I could think about it.

"Anything."

He smiled faintly, and then pursed his lips. "Five years?"

My face twisted into an expression somewhere between chagrin and horror.

"You said anything," he reminded me.

"Yes, but…you'll use the time to find a way out of it. I have to strike while the iron is hot. Besides, it's just too dangerous to be human—for me, at least. So, anything but that."

He frowned. "Three years?"

"No!"

"Isn't it worth anything to you at all?"

I thought about how much I wanted this. Better to keep a poker face, I decided, and not let him know how very much that was. It would give me more leverage. "Six months?"

He rolled his eyes. “Not good enough.”

“One year, then,” I said. “That’s my limit.”

“At least give me two.”

“No way. Nineteen I’ll do. But I’m not going anywhere near twenty. If you’re staying in your teens forever, then so am I.”

He thought for a minute. “All right. Forget time limits. If you want me to be the one—then you’ll just have to meet one condition.”

“Condition?” My voice went flat. “What condition?”

His eyes were cautious—he spoke slowly. “Marry me first.”

I stared at him, waiting….“Okay. What’s the punch line?”

He sighed. “You’re wounding my ego, Bella. I just proposed to you, and you think it’s a joke.”

“Edward, please be serious.”

“I am one hundred percent serious.” He gazed at me with no hint of humor in his face.

“Oh, c’mon,” I said, an edge of hysteria in my voice. “I’m only eighteen.”

“Well, I’m nearly a hundred and ten. It’s time I settled down.”

I looked away, out the dark window, trying to control the panic before it gave me away.

"Look, marriage isn't exactly that high on my list of priorities, you know? It was sort of the kiss of death for Reneé and Charlie."

"Interesting choice of words."

"You know what I mean."

He inhaled deeply. "Please don't tell me that you're afraid of the commitment," his voice was disbelieving, and I understood what he meant.

"That's not it exactly," I hedged. "I'm…afraid of Reneé. She has some really intense opinions on getting married before you're thirty."

"Because she'd rather you became one of the eternal damned than get married." He laughed darkly.

"You think you're joking."

"Bella, if you compare the level of commitment between a marital union as opposed to bartering your soul in exchange for an eternity as a vampire . . ." He shook his head. "If you're not brave enough to marry me, then—"

"Well," I interrupted. "What if I did? What if I told you to take me to Vegas now? Would I be a vampire in three days?"

He smiled, his teeth flashing in the dark. "Sure," he said, calling my bluff. "I'll get my car."

"Dammit." I muttered. "I'll give you eighteen months."

"No deal," he said, grinning. "I like this condition."

"Fine. I'll have Carlisle do it when I graduate."

"If that's what you really want." He shrugged, and his smile became absolutely angelic.

"You're impossible," I groaned. "A monster."

He chuckled. "Is that why you won't marry me?"

I groaned again.

He leaned toward me; his night-dark eyes melted and smoldered and shattered my concentration. "Please, Bella?" he breathed.

I forgot how to breathe for a moment. When I recovered, I shook my head quickly, trying to clear my suddenly clouded mind.

"Would this have gone better if I'd had time to get a ring?"

"No! No rings!" I very nearly shouted.

"Now you've done it," he whispered.

"Oops."

"Charlie's getting up; I'd better leave," Edward said with resignation.

My heart stopped beating.

He gauged my expression for a second. "Would it be childish of me to hide in your closet, then?"

"No," I whispered eagerly. "Stay. Please."

Edward smiled and disappeared.

I seethed in the darkness as I waited for Charlie to check on me. Edward knew exactly what he was doing, and I was willing to bet that all the injured surprise was part of the ploy. Of course, I still had the Carlisle option, but now that I knew there was a chance that Edward would change me himself, I wanted it bad. He was such a cheater.

My door cracked open.

“Morning, Dad.”

“Oh, hey, Bella.” He sounded embarrassed at getting caught. “I didn’t know you were awake.”

“Yeah. I’ve just been waiting for you to wake up so I could take a shower.” I started to get up.

“Hold on,” Charlie said, flipping the light on. I blinked in the sudden brightness, and carefully kept my eyes away from the closet. “Let’s talk for a minute first.”

I couldn’t control my grimace. I’d forgotten to ask Alice for a good excuse.

“You know you’re in trouble.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“I just about went crazy these last three days. I come home from Harry’s funeral, and you’re gone. Jacob could only tell me that you’d run off with Alice Cullen, and that he thought you were in trouble. You didn’t leave me a number, and you didn’t call. I didn’t know where you were or when—or if—you were coming back. Do you have any idea how…how . . .” He couldn’t finish the sentence. He sucked in a sharp breath and moved on. “Can you give me one reason

why I shouldn't ship you off to Jacksonville this second?"

My eyes narrowed. So it was going to be threats, was it? Two could play at that game. I sat up, pulling the quilt around me. "Because I won't go."

"Now just one minute, young lady—"

"Look, Dad, I accept complete responsibility for my actions, and you have the right to ground me for as long as you want. I will also do all the chores and laundry and dishes until you think I've learned my lesson. And I guess you're within your rights if you want to kick me out, too—but that won't make me to go to Florida."

His face turned bright red. He took a few deep breaths before he answered.

"Would you like to explain where you've been?"

Oh, crap. "There was…an emergency."

He raised his eyebrows in expectation of my brilliant explanation.

I filled my cheeks with air and then blew it out noisily. "I don't know what to tell you, Dad. It was mostly a misunderstanding. He said, she said. It got out of hand."

He waited with a distrustful expression.

"See, Alice told Rosalie about me jumping off the cliff…." I was scrambling frantically to make this work, to keep it as close to the truth as possible so that my inability to lie convincingly would not undermine the excuse, but before I could go on,

Charlie's expression reminded me that he didn't know anything about the cliff.

Major oops. As if I wasn't already toast.

"I guess I didn't tell you about that," I choked out. "It was nothing. Just messing around, swimming with Jake. Anyway, Rosalie told Edward, and he was upset. She sort of accidentally made it sound like I was trying to kill myself or something. He wouldn't answer his phone, so Alice dragged me to…L.A., to explain in person." I shrugged, desperately hoping that he would not be so distracted by my slip that he'd miss the brilliant explanation I'd provided.

Charlie's face was frozen. "Were you trying to kill yourself, Bella?"

"No, of course not. Just having fun with Jake. Cliff diving. The La Push kids do it all the time. Like I said, nothing."

Charlie's face heated up—from frozen to hot with fury. "What's it to Edward Cullen anyway?" he barked. "All this time, he's just left you dangling without a word—"

I interrupted him. "Another misunderstanding."

His face flushed again. "So is he back then?"

"I'm not sure what the exact plan is. I think they all are."

He shook his head, the vein in his forehead pulsing. "I want you to stay away from him, Bella. I don't trust him. He's rotten for you. I won't let him mess you up like that again."

“Fine,” I said curtly.

Charlie rocked back onto his heels. “Oh.” He scrambled for a second, exhaling loudly in surprise. “I thought you were going to be difficult.”

“I am.” I stared straight into his eyes. “I meant, ‘Fine, I’ll move out.’”

His eyes bulged; his face turned puce. My resolve wavered as I started to worry about his health. He was no younger than Harry….

“Dad, I don’t want to move out,” I said in a softer tone. “I love you. I know you’re worried, but you need to trust me on this. And you’re going to have to ease up on Edward if you want me to stay. Do you want me to live here or not?”

“That’s not fair, Bella. You know I want you to stay.”

“Then be nice to Edward, because he’s going to be where I am.” I said it with confidence. The conviction of my epiphany was still strong.

“Not under my roof,” Charlie stormed.

I sighed a heavy sigh. “Look, I’m not going to give you any more ultimatums tonight—or I guess it’s this morning. Just think about it for a few days, okay? But keep in mind that Edward and I are sort of a package deal.”

“Bella—”

“Think it over,” I insisted. “And while you’re doing that, could you give me some privacy? I really need a shower.”

Charlie's face was a strange shade of purple, but he left, slamming the door behind him. I heard him stomp furiously down the stairs.

I threw off my quilt, and Edward was already there, sitting in the rocking chair as if he'd been present through the whole conversation.

"Sorry about that," I whispered.

"It's not as if I don't deserve far worse," he murmured. "Don't start anything with Charlie over me, please."

"Don't worry about it," I breathed as I gathered up my bathroom things and a set of clean clothes. "I will start exactly as much as is necessary, and no more than that. Or are you trying to tell me I have nowhere to go?" I widened my eyes with false alarm.

"You'd move in with a house full of vampires?"

"That's probably the safest place for someone like me. Besides . . ." I grinned. "If Charlie kicks me out, then there's no need for a graduation deadline, is there?"

His jaw tightened. "So eager for eternal damnation," he muttered.

"You know you don't really believe that."

"Oh, don't I?" he fumed.

"No. You don't."

He glowered at me and started to speak, but I cut him off.

"If you really believed that you'd lost your soul, then when I found you in Volterra, you would have realized

immediately what was happening, instead of thinking we were both dead together. But you didn't—you said 'Amazing. Carlisle was right,'" I reminded him, triumphant. "There's hope in you, after all."

For once, Edward was speechless.

"So let's both just be hopeful, all right?" I suggested. "Not that it matters. If you stay, I don't need heaven."

He got up slowly, and came to put his hands on either side of my face as he stared into my eyes. "Forever," he vowed, still a little staggered.

"That's all I'm asking for," I said, and stretched up on my toes so that I could press my lips to his.

# Epilogue

## TREATY

Almost everything was back to normal—the good, pre-zombie normal—in less time than I would have believed possible. The hospital welcomed Carlisle back with eager arms, not even bothering to conceal their delight that Esme had found life in L.A. so little to her liking. Thanks to the Calculus test I'd missed while abroad, Alice and Edward were in better to shape to graduate than I was at the moment. Suddenly, college was a priority (college was still plan B, on the off chance that Edward's offer swayed me from the post-graduation Carlisle option). Many deadlines had passed me by, but Edward had a new stack of applications for me to fill out every day. He'd already done the Harvard route, so it didn't bother him that, thanks to my procrastination, we might both end up at Peninsula Community College next year.

Charlie was not happy with me, or speaking to Edward. But at least Edward was allowed—during my designated visiting hours—inside the house again. I just wasn't allowed out of it.

School and work were the only exceptions, and the dreary, dull yellow walls of my classrooms had become oddly inviting to me of late. That had a lot to do with the person who sat in the desk beside me.

Edward had resumed his schedule from the beginning of the year, which put him in most of my classes again. My behavior had been such last fall, after the Cullens' supposed move to L.A., that the seat beside me had never been filled. Even Mike, always eager to take any advantage, had kept a safe distance. With

Edward back in place, it was almost as if the last eight months were just a disturbing nightmare.

Almost, but not quite. There was the house arrest situation, for one thing. And for another, before the fall, I hadn't been best friends with Jacob Black. So, of course, I hadn't missed him then.

I wasn't at liberty to go to La Push, and Jacob wasn't coming to see me. He wouldn't even answer my phone calls.

I made these calls mostly at night, after Edward had been kicked out—promptly at nine by a grimly gleeful Charlie—and before Edward snuck back through my window when Charlie was asleep. I chose that time to make my fruitless calls because I'd noticed that Edward made a certain face every time I mentioned Jacob's name. Sort of disapproving and wary…maybe even angry. I guessed that he had some reciprocal prejudice against the werewolves, though he wasn't as vocal as Jacob had been about the "bloodsuckers."

So, I didn't mention Jacob much.

With Edward near me, it was hard to think about unhappy things—even my former best friend, who was probably very unhappy right now, due to me. When I did think of Jake, I always felt guilty for not thinking of him more.

The fairy tale was back on. Prince returned, bad spell broken. I wasn't sure exactly what to do about the leftover, unresolved character. Where was his happily ever after?

Weeks passed, and Jacob still wouldn't answer my calls. It started to become a constant worry. Like a dripping faucet in the back of my head that I couldn't

shut off or ignore. Drip, drip, drip. Jacob, Jacob, Jacob.

So, though I didn't mention Jacob much, sometimes my frustration and anxiety boiled over.

"It's just plain rude!" I vented one Saturday afternoon when Edward picked me up from work. Being angry about things was easier than feeling guilty. "Downright insulting!"

I'd varied my pattern, in hopes of a different response. I'd called Jake from work this time, only to get an unhelpful Billy. Again.

"Billy said he didn't want to talk to me," I fumed, glaring at the rain oozing down the passenger window. "That he was there, and wouldn't walk three steps to get to the phone! Usually Billy just says he's out or busy or sleeping or something. I mean, it's not like I didn't know he was lying to me, but at least it was a polite way to handle it. I guess Billy hates me now, too. It's not fair!"

"It's not you, Bella," Edward said quietly. "Nobody hates you."

"Feels that way," I muttered, folding my arms across my chest. It was no more than a stubborn gesture. There was no hole there now—I could barely remember the empty feeling anymore.

"Jacob knows we're back, and I'm sure that he's ascertained that I'm with you," Edward said. "He won't come anywhere near me. The enmity is rooted too deeply."

"That's stupid. He knows you're not…like other vampires."

"There's still good reason to keep a safe distance."

I glared blindly out the windshield, seeing only Jacob's face, set in the bitter mask I hated.

"Bella, we are what we are," Edward said quietly. "I can control myself, but I doubt he can. He's very young. It would most likely turn into a fight, and I don't know if I could stop it before I k—" he broke off, and then quickly continued. "Before I hurt him. You would be unhappy. I don't want that to happen."

I remembered what Jacob had said in the kitchen, hearing the words with perfect recall in his husky voice. I'm not sure that I'm even-tempered enough to handle that....You probably wouldn't like it so much if I killed your friend. But he'd been able to handle it, that time....

"Edward Cullen," I whispered. "Were you about to say 'killed him'? Were you?"

He looked away from me, staring into the rain. In front of us, the red light I hadn't noticed turned green and he started forward again, driving very slowly. Not his usual way of driving.

"I would try...very hard...not to do that," Edward finally said.

I stared at him with my mouth hanging open, but he continued to look straight ahead. We were paused at the corner stop sign.

Abruptly, I remembered what had happened to Paris when Romeo came back. The stage directions were simple: They fight. Paris falls.

But that was ridiculous. Impossible.

"Well," I said, and took a deep breath, shaking my head to dispel the words in my head. "Nothing like that is ever going to happen, so there's no reason to worry about it. And you know Charlie's staring at the clock right now. You'd better get me home before I get in more trouble for being late."

I turned my face up toward him, to smile halfheartedly.

Every time I looked at his face, that impossibly perfect face, my heart pounded strong and healthy and very there in my chest. This time, the pounding raced ahead of its usual besotted pace. I recognized the expression on his statue-still face.

"You're already in more trouble, Bella," he whispered through unmoving lips.

I slid closer, clutching his arm as I followed his gaze to see what he was seeing. I don't know what I expected—maybe Victoria standing in the middle of the street, her flaming red hair blowing in the wind, or a line of tall black cloaks…or a pack of angry werewolves. But I didn't see anything at all.

"What? What is it?"

He took a deep breath. "Charlie…"

"My dad?" I screeched.

He looked down at me then, and his expression was calm enough to ease some of my panic.

"Charlie…is probably not going to kill you, but he's thinking about it," he told me. He started to drive forward again, down my street, but he passed the house and parked by the edge of the trees.

“What did I do?” I gasped.

Edward glanced back at Charlie’s house. I followed his gaze, and noticed for the first time what was parked in the driveway next to the cruiser. Shiny, bright red, impossible to miss. My motorcycle, flaunting itself in the driveway.

Edward had said that Charlie was ready to kill me, so he must know that—that it was mine. There was only one person who could be behind this treachery.

“No!” I gasped. “Why? Why would Jacob do this to me?” The sting of betrayal washed through me. I had trusted Jacob implicitly—trusted him with every single secret I had. He was supposed to be my safe harbor—the person I could always rely on. Of course things were strained right now, but I didn’t think any of the underlying foundation had changed. I didn’t think that was changeable!

What had I done to deserve this? Charlie was going to be so mad—and worse than that, he was going to be hurt and worried. Didn’t he have enough to deal with already? I would have never imagined that Jake could be so petty and just plain mean. Tears sprang, smarting, into my eyes, but they were not tears of sadness. I had been betrayed. I was suddenly so angry that my head throbbed like it was going to explode.

“Is he still here?” I hissed.

“Yes. He’s waiting for us there.” Edward told me, nodding toward the slender path that divided the dark fringe of the forest in two.

I jumped out of the car, launching myself toward the trees with my hands already balled into fists for the first punch.

Why did Edward have to be so much faster than me?

He caught me around the waist before I made the path.

“Let me go! I’m going to murder him! Traitor!” I shouted the epithet toward the trees.

“Charlie will hear you,” Edward warned me. “And once he gets you inside, he may brick over the doorway.”

I glanced back at the house instinctively, and it seemed like the glossy red bike was all I could see. I was seeing red. My head throbbed again.

“Just give me one round with Jacob, and then I’ll deal with Charlie.” I struggled futilely to break free.

“Jacob Black wants to see me. That’s why he’s still here.”

That stopped me cold—took the fight right out of me. My hands went limp. They fight; Paris falls.

I was furious, but not that furious.

“Talk?” I asked.

“More or less.”

“How much more?” My voice shook.

Edward smoothed my hair back from my face. “Don’t worry, he’s not here to fight me. He’s acting as…spokesperson for the pack.”

“Oh.”

Edward looked at the house again, then tightened his arm around my waist and pulled me toward the woods. “We should hurry. Charlie’s getting impatient.”

We didn’t have to go far; Jacob waited just a short ways up the path. He lounged against a mossy tree trunk as he waited, his face hard and bitter, exactly the way I knew it would be. He looked at me, and then at Edward. Jacob’s mouth stretched into a humorless sneer, and he shrugged away from the tree. He stood on the balls of his bare feet, leaning slightly forward, with his trembling hands clenched into fists. He looked bigger than the last time I’d seen him. Somehow, impossibly, he was still growing. He would tower over Edward, if they stood next to each other.

But Edward stopped as soon as we saw him, leaving a wide space between us and Jacob. Edward turned his body, shifting me so that I was behind him. I leaned around him to stare at Jacob—to accuse him with my eyes.

I would have thought that seeing his resentful, cynical expression would only make me angrier. Instead, it reminded me of the last time I’d seen him, with tears in his eyes. My fury weakened, faltered, as I stared at Jacob. It had been so long since I’d seen him—I hated that our reunion had to be like this.

“Bella,” Jacob said as a greeting, nodding once toward me without looking away from Edward.

"Why?" I whispered, trying to hide the sound of the lump in my throat. "How could you do this to me, Jacob?"

The sneer vanished, but his face stayed hard and rigid. "It's for the best."

"What is that supposed to mean? Do you want Charlie to strangle me? Or did you want him to have a heart attack, like Harry? No matter how mad you are at me, how could you do this to him?"

Jacob winced, and his eyebrows pulled together, but he didn't answer.

"He didn't want to hurt anyone—he just wanted to get you grounded, so that you wouldn't be allowed to spend time with me," Edward murmured, explaining the thoughts Jacob wouldn't say.

Jacob's eyes sparked with hate as he glowered at Edward again.

"Aw, Jake!" I groaned. "I'm already grounded! Why do you think I haven't been down to La Push to kick your butt for avoiding my phone calls?"

Jacob's eyes flashed back to me, confused for the first time. "That's why?" he asked, and then locked his jaw, like he was sorry he'd said anything.

"He thought I wouldn't let you, not Charlie," Edward explained again.

"Stop that," Jacob snapped.

Edward didn't answer.

Jacob shuddered once, and then gritted his teeth as hard as his fists. “Bella wasn’t exaggerating about your… abilities,” he said through his teeth. “So you must already know why I’m here.”

“Yes,” Edward agreed in a soft voice. “But, before you begin, I need to say something.”

Jacob waited, clenching and unclenching his hands as he tried to control the shivers rolling down his arms.

“Thank you,” Edward said, and his voice throbbed with the depth of his sincerity. “I will never be able to tell you how grateful I am. I will owe you for the rest of my… existence.”

Jacob stared at him blankly, his shudders stilled by surprise. He exchanged a quick glance with me, but my face was just as mystified.

“For keeping Bella alive,” Edward clarified, his voice rough and fervent. “When I…didn’t.”

“Edward—,” I started to say, but he held one hand up, his eyes on Jacob.

Understanding washed over Jacob’s face before the hard mask returned. “I didn’t do it for your benefit.”

“I know. But that doesn’t erase the gratitude I feel. I thought you should know. If there’s ever anything in my power to do for you…”

Jacob raised one black brow.

Edward shook his head. “That’s not in my power.”

“Whose, then?” Jacob growled.

Edward looked down at me. “Hers. I’m a quick learner, Jacob Black, and I don’t make the same mistake twice. I’m here until she orders me away.”

I was immersed momentarily in his golden gaze. It wasn’t hard to understand what I’d missed in the conversation. The only thing that Jacob would want from Edward would be his absence.

“Never,” I whispered, still locked in Edward’s eyes.

Jacob made a gagging sound.

I unwillingly broke free from Edward’s gaze to frown at Jacob. “Was there something else you needed, Jacob? You wanted me in trouble—mission accomplished. Charlie might just send me to military school. But that won’t keep me away from Edward. There’s nothing that can do that. What more do you want?”

Jacob kept his eyes on Edward. “I just needed to remind your bloodsucking friends of a few key points in the treaty they agreed to. The treaty that is the only thing stopping me from ripping his throat out right this minute.”

“We haven’t forgotten,” Edward said at the same time that I demanded, “What key points?”

Jacob still glowered at Edward, but he answered me. “The treaty is quite specific. If any of them bite a human, the truce is over. Bite, not kill,” he emphasized. Finally, he looked at me. His eyes were cold.

It only took me a second to grasp the distinction, and then my face was as cold as his.

"That's none of your business."

"The hell it—" was all he managed to choke out.

I didn't expect my hasty words to bring on such a strong response. Despite the warning he'd come to give, he must not have known. He must have thought the warning was just a precaution. He hadn't realized—or didn't want to believe—that I had already made my choice. That I was really intending to become a member of the Cullen family.

My answer sent Jacob into near convulsions. He pressed his fists hard against his temples, closing his eyes tight and curling in on himself as he tried to control the spasms. His face turned sallow green under the russet skin.

"Jake? You okay?" I asked anxiously.

I took a half-step toward him, then Edward caught me and yanked me back behind his own body. "Careful! He's not under control," he warned me.

But Jacob was already somewhat himself again; only his arms were shaking now. He scowled at Edward with pure hate. "Ugh. I would never hurt her."

Neither Edward or I missed the inflection, or the accusation it contained. A low hiss escaped Edward's lips. Jacob clenched his fists reflexively.

"BELLA!" Charlie's roar echoed from the direction of the house. "YOU GET IN THIS HOUSE THIS INSTANT!"

All of us froze, listening to the silence that followed.

I was the first to speak; my voice trembled. "Crap."

Jacob's furious expression faltered. "I am sorry about that," he muttered. "I had to do what I could—I had to try…."

"Thanks." The tremor in my voice ruined the sarcasm. I stared up the path, half-expecting Charlie to come barreling through the wet ferns like an enraged bull. I would be the red flag in that scenario.

"Just one more thing," Edward said to me, and then he looked at Jacob. "We've found no trace of Victoria on our side of the line—have you?"

He knew the answer as soon as Jacob thought it, but Jacob spoke the answer anyway. "The last time was while Bella was…away. We let her think she was slipping through—we were tightening the circle, getting ready to ambush her—"

Ice shot down my spine.

"But then she took off like a bat out of hell. Near as we can tell, she caught your little female's scent and bailed. She hasn't come near our lands since."

Edward nodded. "When she comes back, she's not your problem anymore. We'll—"

"She killed on our turf," Jacob hissed. "She's ours!"

"No—," I began to protest both declarations.

"BELLA! I SEE HIS CAR AND I KNOW YOU'RE OUT THERE! IF YOU AREN'T INSIDE THIS HOUSE IN ONE MINUTE…!" Charlie didn't bother to finish his threat.

"Let's go," Edward said.

I looked back at Jacob, torn. Would I see him again?

“Sorry,” he whispered so low that I had to read his lips to understand. “’Bye, Bells.”

“You promised,” I reminded him desperately. “Still friends, right?”

Jacob shook his head slowly, and the lump in my throat nearly strangled me.

“You know how hard I’ve tried to keep that promise, but…I can’t see how to keep trying. Not now . . .” He struggled to keep his hard mask in place, but it wavered, and then disappeared. “Miss you,” he mouthed. One of his hands reached toward me, his fingers outstretched, like he wished they were long enough to cross the distance between us.

“Me, too,” I choked out. My hand reached toward his across the wide space.

Like we were connected, the echo of his pain twisted inside me. His pain, my pain.

“Jake . . .” I took a step toward him. I wanted to wrap my arms around his waist and erase the expression of misery on his face.

Edward pulled me back again, his arms restraining instead of defending.

“It’s okay,” I promised him, looking up to read his face with trust in my eyes. He would understand.

His eyes were unreadable, his face expressionless. Cold. “No, it’s not.”

“Let her go,” Jacob snarled, furious again. “She wants to!” He took two long strides forward. A glint of

anticipation flashed in his eyes. His chest seemed to swell as it shuddered.

Edward pushed me behind himself, wheeling to face Jacob.

“No! Edward—!”

“ISABELLA SWAN!”

“Come on! Charlie’s mad!” My voice was panicked, but not because of Charlie now. “Hurry!”

I tugged on him and he relaxed a little. He pulled me back slowly, always keeping his eyes on Jacob as were treated.

Jacob watched us with a dark scowl on his bitter face. The anticipation drained from his eyes, and then, just before the forest came between us, his face suddenly crumpled in pain.

I knew that last glimpse of his face would haunt me until I saw him smile again.

And right there I vowed that I would see him smile, and soon. I would find a way to keep my friend.

Edward kept his arm tight around my waist, holding me close. That was the only thing that held the tears inside my eyes.

I had some serious problems.

My best friend counted me with his enemies.

Victoria was still on the loose, putting everyone I loved in danger.

If I didn't become a vampire soon, the Volturi would kill me.

And now it seemed that if I did, the Quileute werewolves would try to do the job themselves—along with trying to kill my future family. I didn't think they had any chance really, but would my best friend get himself killed in the attempt?

Very serious problems. So why did they all suddenly seem insignificant when we broke through the last of the trees and I caught sight of the expression on Charlie's purple face?

Edward squeezed me gently. "I'm here."

I drew in a deep breath.

That was true. Edward was here, with his arms around me.

I could face anything as long as that was true.

I squared my shoulders and walked forward to meet my fate, with my destiny solidly at my side.


eclipse
STEPHENIE MEYER
AUTHOR OF THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLERS TWILIGHT AND NEW MOON

# Preface

All our attempts at subterfage had been in vain.

With ice in my heart, I watched him prepare to defend me. His intense concentration betrayed no hint of doubt, though he was outnumbered. I knew that we could expect no help — at this moment, his family was fighting for their lives just as surely as he was for ours.

Would I ever learn the outcome of that other fight? Find out who the winners and the losers were? Would I live long enough for that?

The odds of that didn't look so great.

Black eyes, wild with their fierce craving for my death, watched for the moment when my protector's attention would be diverted. The moment when I would surely die.

Somewhere, far, far away in the cold forest, a wolf howled.

# Chapter 1

## ULTIMATUM

Bella,

~~I don't know why you're making Charlie carry notes to Billy like we're in second grade. If I wanted to talk to you I would answer the~~

~~You made the choice here, okay? You cant have it both ways when~~

~~What part of 'mortal enemies' is too complicated for you to~~

~~Look, I know I'm being a jerk, but there's just no way around~~

~~We can't be friends when you're spending all your time with a bunch of~~

~~It just makes it worse when I think about you too much, so don't write anymore~~

Yeah, I miss you too. A lot. Doesn't change anything. Sorry.

Jacob

I ran my fingers across the page, feeling the dents where he had pressed the pen to the paper so hard that it had nearly broken through. I could picture him writing this — scrawling the angry letters in his rough handwriting, slashing through line after line when the words came out wrong, maybe even snapping the pen in his too-big hand; that would explain the ink splatters. I could imagine the frustration pulling his black eyebrows together and crumpling his forehead. If I'd been there, I might have laughed. Don't give yourself a brain hemorrhage, Jacob, I would have told him. Just spit it out.

Laughing was the last thing I felt like doing now as I reread the words I'd already memorized. His answer to my pleading note — passed from Charlie to Billy to him, just like second grade, as he'd pointed out — was no surprise. I'd known the essence of what it would say before I'd opened it.

What was surprising was how much each crossed-out line wounded me — as if the points of the letters had cutting edges. More than that, behind each angry beginning lurked a vast pool of hurt; Jacob's pain cut me deeper than my own.

While I was pondering this, I caught the unmistakable scent of a smoking burner rising from the kitchen. In another house, the fact that someone besides myself was cooking might not be a cause for panicking.

I shoved the wrinkled paper into my back pocket and ran, making it downstairs in the nick of time.

The jar of spaghetti sauce Charlie'd stuck in the microwave was only on its first revolution when I yanked the door open and pulled it out.

"What did I do wrong?" Charlie demanded.

"You're supposed to take the lid off first, Dad. Metal's bad for microwaves." I swiftly removed the lid as I spoke, poured half the sauce into a bowl, and then put the bowl inside the microwave and the jar back in the fridge; I fixed the time and pressed start.

Charlie watched my adjustments with pursed lips. "Did I get the noodles right?"

I looked in the pan on the stove — the source of the smell that had alerted me. "Stirring helps," I said

mildly. I found a spoon and tried to de-clump the mushy hunk that was scalded to the bottom.

Charlie sighed.

“So what’s all this about?” I asked him.

He folded his arms across his chest and glared out the back windows into the sheeting rain. “Don’t know what you’re talking about,” he grumbled.

I was mystified. Charlie cooking? And what was with the surly attitude? Edward wasn’t here yet; usually my dad reserved this kind of behavior for my boyfriend’s benefit, doing his best to illustrate the theme of “unwelcome” with every word and posture. Charlie’s efforts were unnecessary — Edward knew exactly what my dad was thinking without the show.

The word boyfriend had me chewing on the inside of my cheek with a familiar tension while I stirred. It wasn’t the right word, not at all. I needed something more expressive of eternal commitment… . But words like destiny and fate sounded hokey when you used them in casual conversation.

Edward had another word in mind, and that word was the source of the tension I felt. It put my teeth on edge just to think it to myself.

Fiancée. Ugh. I shuddered away from the thought.

“Did I miss something? Since when do you make dinner?” I asked Charlie. The pasta lump bobbed in the boiling water as I poked it. “Or try to make dinner, I should say.”

Charlie shrugged. “There’s no law that says I can’t cook in my own house.”

"You would know," I replied, grinning as I eyed the badge pinned to his leather jacket.

"Ha. Good one." He shrugged out of the jacket as if my glance had reminded him he still had it on, and hung it on the peg reserved for his gear. His gun belt was already slung in place — he hadn't felt the need to wear that to the station for a few weeks. There had been no more disturbing disappearances to trouble the small town of Forks, Washington, no more sightings of the giant, mysterious wolves in the ever-rainy woods… .

I prodded the noodles in silence, guessing that Charlie would get around to talking about whatever was bothering him in his own time. My dad was not a man of many words, and the effort he had put into trying to orchestrate a sit-down dinner with me made it clear there were an uncharacteristic number of words on his mind.

I glanced at the clock routinely — something I did every few minutes around this time. Less than a half hour to go now.

Afternoons were the hardest part of my day. Ever since my former best friend (and werewolf), Jacob Black, had informed on me about the motorcycle I'd been riding on the sly — a betrayal he had devised in order to get me grounded so that I couldn't spend time with my boyfriend (and vampire), Edward Cullen — Edward had been allowed to see me only from seven till nine-thirty p.m., always inside the confines of my home and under the supervision of my dad's unfailingly crabby glare.

This was an escalation from the previous, slightly less stringent grounding that I'd earned for an

unexplained three-day disappearance and one episode of cliff diving.

Of course, I still saw Edward at school, because there wasn't anything Charlie could do about that. And then, Edward spent almost every night in my room, too, but Charlie wasn't precisely aware of that. Edward's ability to climb easily and silently through my second-story window was almost as useful as his ability to read Charlie's mind.

Though the afternoon was the only time I spent away from Edward, it was enough to make me restless, and the hours always dragged. Still, I endured my punishment without complaining because — for one thing — I knew I'd earned it, and — for another — because I couldn't bear to hurt my dad by moving out now, when a much more permanent separation hovered, invisible to Charlie, so close on my horizon.

My dad sat down at the table with a grunt and unfolded the damp newspaper there; within seconds he was clucking his tongue in disapproval.

"I don't know why you read the news, Dad. It only ticks you off."

He ignored me, grumbling at the paper in his hands. "This is why everyone wants to live in a small town! Ridiculous."

"What have big cities done wrong now?"

"Seattle's making a run for murder capital of the country. Five unsolved homicides in the last two weeks. Can you imagine living like that?"

"I think Phoenix is actually higher up the homicide list, Dad. I have lived like that." And I'd never come

close to being a murder victim until after I moved to his safe little town. In fact, I was still on several hit lists… . The spoon shook in my hands, making the water tremble.

“Well, you couldn’t pay me enough,” Charlie said.

I gave up on saving dinner and settled for serving it; I had to use a steak knife to cut a portion of spaghetti for Charlie and then myself, while he watched with a sheepish expression. Charlie coated his helping with sauce and dug in. I disguised my own clump as well as I could and followed his example without much enthusiasm. We ate in silence for a moment. Charlie was still scanning the news, so I picked up my much-abused copy of Wuthering Heights from where I’d left it this morning at breakfast, and tried to lose myself in turn-of-the-century England while I waited for him to start talking.

I was just to the part where Heathcliff returns when Charlie cleared his throat and threw the paper to the floor.

“You’re right,” Charlie said. “I did have a reason for doing this.” He waved his fork at the gluey spread. “I wanted to talk to you.”

I laid the book aside; the binding was so destroyed that it slumped flat to the table. “You could have just asked.”

He nodded, his eyebrows pulling together. “Yeah. I’ll remember that next time. I thought taking dinner off your hands would soften you up.”

I laughed. “It worked — your cooking skills have me soft as a marshmallow. What do you need, Dad?”

“Well, it’s about Jacob.”

I felt my face harden. “What about him?” I asked through stiff lips.

“Easy, Bells. I know you’re still upset that he told on you, but it was the right thing. He was being responsible.”

“Responsible,” I repeated scathingly, rolling my eyes. “Right. So, what about Jacob?”

The careless question repeated inside my head, anything but trivial. What about Jacob? What was I going to do about him? My former best friend who was now … what? My enemy? I cringed.

Charlie’s face was suddenly wary. “Don’t get mad at me, okay?”

“Mad?”

“Well, it’s about Edward, too.”

My eyes narrowed.

Charlie’s voice got gruffer. “I let him in the house, don’t I?”

“You do,” I admitted. “For brief periods of time. Of course, you might let me out of the house for brief periods now and then, too,” I continued — only jokingly; I knew I was on lockdown for the duration of the school year. “I’ve been pretty good lately.”

“Well, that’s kind of where I was heading with this… .” And then Charlie’s face stretched into an unexpected eye-crinkling grin; for a second he looked twenty years younger.

I saw a dim glimmer of possibility in that smile, but I proceeded slowly. “I’m confused, Dad. Are we talking about Jacob, or Edward, or me being grounded?”

The grin flashed again. “Sort of all three.”

“And how do they relate?” I asked, cautious.

“Okay.” He sighed, raising his hands as if in surrender. “So I’m thinking maybe you deserve a parole for good behavior. For a teenager, you’re amazingly non-whiney.”

My voice and eyebrows shot up. “Seriously? I’m free?”

Where was this coming from? I’d been positive I would be under house arrest until I actually moved out, and Edward hadn’t picked up any wavering in Charlie’s thoughts… .

Charlie held up one finger. “Conditionally.”

The enthusiasm vanished. “Fantastic,” I groaned.

“Bella, this is more of a request than a demand, okay? You’re free. But I’m hoping you’ll use that freedom … judiciously.”

“What does that mean?”

He sighed again. “I know you’re satisfied to spend all of your time with Edward —”

“I spend time with Alice, too,” I interjected. Edward’s sister had no hours of visitation; she came and went as she pleased. Charlie was putty in her capable hands.

"That's true," he said. "But you have other friends besides the Cullens, Bella. Or you used to."

We stared at each other for a long moment.

"When was the last time you spoke to Angela Weber?" he threw at me.

"Friday at lunch," I answered immediately.

Before Edward's return, my school friends had polarized into two groups. I liked to think of those groups as good vs. evil. Us and them worked, too. The good guys were Angela, her steady boyfriend Ben Cheney, and Mike Newton; these three had all very generously forgiven me for going crazy when Edward left. Lauren Mallory was the evil core of the them side, and almost everyone else, including my first friend in Forks, Jessica Stanley, seemed content to go along with her anti-Bella agenda.

With Edward back at school, the dividing line had become even more distinct.

Edward's return had taken its toll on Mike's friendship, but Angela was unswervingly loyal, and Ben followed her lead. Despite the natural aversion most humans felt toward the Cullens, Angela sat dutifully beside Alice every day at lunch. After a few weeks, Angela even looked comfortable there. It was difficult not to be charmed by the Cullens — once one gave them the chance to be charming.

"Outside of school?" Charlie asked, calling my attention back.

"I haven't seen anyone outside of school, Dad. Grounded, remember? And Angela has a boyfriend,

too. She's always with Ben. If I'm really free," I added, heavy on the skepticism, "maybe we could double."

"Okay. But then ..." He hesitated. "You and Jake used to be joined at the hip, and now —"

I cut him off. "Can you get to the point, Dad? What's your condition — exactly?"

"I don't think you should dump all your other friends for your boyfriend, Bella," he said in a stern voice. "It's not nice, and I think your life would be better balanced if you kept some other people in it. What happened last September ..."

I flinched.

"Well," he said defensively. "If you'd had more of a life outside of Edward Cullen, it might not have been like that."

"It would have been exactly like that," I muttered.

"Maybe, maybe not."

"The point?" I reminded him.

"Use your new freedom to see your other friends, too. Keep it balanced."

I nodded slowly. "Balance is good. Do I have specific time quotas to fill, though?"

He made a face, but shook his head. "I don't want to make this complicated. Just don't forget your friends ..."

It was a dilemma I was already struggling with. My friends. People who, for their own safety, I would never be able to see again after graduation.

So what was the better course of action? Spend time with them while I could? Or start the separation now to make it more gradual? I quailed at the idea of the second option.

"… particularly Jacob," Charlie added before I could think things through more than that.

A greater dilemma than the first. It took me a moment to find the right words. "Jacob might be … difficult."

"The Blacks are practically family, Bella," he said, stern and fatherly again. "And Jacob has been a very, very good friend to you."

"I know that."

"Don't you miss him at all?" Charlie asked, frustrated.

My throat suddenly felt swollen; I had to clear it twice before I answered. "Yes, I do miss him," I admitted, still looking down. "I miss him a lot."

"Then why is it difficult?"

It wasn't something I was at liberty to explain. It was against the rules for normal people — human people like me and Charlie — to know about the clandestine world full of myths and monsters that existed secretly around us. I knew all about that world — and I was in no small amount of trouble as a result. I wasn't about to get Charlie in the same trouble.

"With Jacob there is a … conflict," I said slowly. "A conflict about the friendship thing, I mean.

Friendship doesn't always seem to be enough for Jake." I wound my excuse out of details that were true but insignificant, hardly crucial compared to the fact that Jacob's werewolf pack bitterly hated Edward's vampire family — and therefore me, too, as I fully intended to join that family. It just wasn't something I could work out with him in a note, and he wouldn't answer my calls. But my plan to deal with the werewolf in person had definitely not gone over well with the vampires.

"Isn't Edward up for a little healthy competition?" Charlie's voice was sarcastic now.

I leveled a dark look at him. "There's no competition."

"You're hurting Jake's feelings, avoiding him like this. He'd rather be just friends than nothing."

Oh, now I was avoiding him?

"I'm pretty sure Jake doesn't want to be friends at all." The words burned in my mouth. "Where'd you get that idea, anyway?"

Charlie looked embarrassed now. "The subject might have come up today with Billy… ."

"You and Billy gossip like old women," I complained, stabbing my fork viciously into the congealed spaghetti on my plate.

"Billy's worried about Jacob," Charlie said. "Jake's having a hard time right now… . He's depressed."

I winced, but kept my eyes on the blob.

"And then you were always so happy after spending the day with Jake." Charlie sighed.

"I'm happy now," I growled fiercely through my teeth.

The contrast between my words and tone broke through the tension. Charlie burst into laughter, and I had to join in.

"Okay, okay," I agreed. "Balance."

"And Jacob," he insisted.

"I'll try."

"Good. Find that balance, Bella. And, oh, yeah, you've got some mail," Charlie said, closing the subject with no attempt at subtlety. "It's by the stove."

I didn't move, my thoughts twisting into snarls around Jacob's name. It was most likely junk mail; I'd just gotten a package from my mom yesterday and I wasn't expecting anything else.

Charlie shoved his chair away from the table and stretched as he got to his feet. He took his plate to the sink, but before he turned the water on to rinse it, he paused to toss a thick envelope at me. The letter skidded across the table and thunked into my elbow.

"Er, thanks," I muttered, puzzled by his pushiness. Then I saw the return address — the letter was from the University of Alaska Southeast. "That was quick. I guess I missed the deadline on that one, too."

Charlie chuckled.

I flipped the envelope over and then glared up at him. "It's open."

"I was curious."

“I’m shocked, Sheriff. That’s a federal crime.”

“Oh, just read it.”

I pulled out the letter, and a folded schedule of courses.

“Congratulations,” he said before I could read anything. “Your first acceptance.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“We should talk about tuition. I’ve got some money saved up —”

“Hey, hey, none of that. I’m not touching your retirement, Dad. I’ve got my college fund.” What was left of it — and there hadn’t been much to begin with.

Charlie frowned. “Some of these places are pretty pricey, Bells. I want to help. You don’t have to go to all the way to Alaska just because it’s cheaper.”

It wasn’t cheaper, not at all. But it was far away, and Juneau had an average of three hundred twenty-one overcast days per year. The first was my prerequisite, the second was Edward’s.

“I’ve got it covered. Besides, there’s lots of financial aid out there. It’s easy to get loans.” I hoped my bluff wasn’t too obvious. I hadn’t actually done a lot of research on the subject.

“So … ,” Charlie began, and then he pursed his lips and looked away.

“So what?”

"Nothing. I was just …" He frowned. "Just wondering what … Edward's plans are for next year?"

"Oh."

"Well?"

Three quick raps on the door saved me. Charlie rolled his eyes and I jumped up.

"Coming!" I called while Charlie mumbled something that sounded like, "Go away." I ignored him and went to let Edward in.

I wrenched the door out of my way — ridiculously eager — and there he was, my personal miracle.

Time had not made me immune to the perfection of his face, and I was sure that I would never take any aspect of him for granted. My eyes traced over his pale white features: the hard square of his jaw, the softer curve of his full lips — twisted up into a smile now, the straight line of his nose, the sharp angle of his cheekbones, the smooth marble span of his forehead — partially obscured by a tangle of rain-darkened bronze hair… .

I saved his eyes for last, knowing that when I looked into them I was likely to lose my train of thought. They were wide, warm with liquid gold, and framed by a thick fringe of black lashes. Staring into his eyes always made me feel extraordinary — sort of like my bones were turning spongy. I was also a little lightheaded, but that could have been because I'd forgotten to keep breathing. Again.

It was a face any male model in the world would trade his soul for. Of course, that might be exactly the asking price: one soul.

No. I didn’t believe that. I felt guilty for even thinking it, and was glad — as I was often glad — that I was the one person whose thoughts were a mystery to Edward.

I reached for his hand, and sighed when his cold fingers found mine. His touch brought with it the strangest sense of relief — as if I’d been in pain and that pain had suddenly ceased.

“Hey.” I smiled a little at my anticlimactic greeting.

He raised our interlaced fingers to brush my cheek with the back of his hand. “How was your afternoon?”

“Slow.”

“For me, as well.”

He pulled my wrist up to his face, our hands still twisted together. His eyes closed as his nose skimmed along the skin there, and he smiled gently without opening them. Enjoying the bouquet while resisting the wine, as he’d once put it.

I knew that the scent of my blood — so much sweeter to him than any other person’s blood, truly like wine beside water to an alcoholic — caused him actual pain from the burning thirst it engendered. But he didn’t seem to shy away from it as much as he once had. I could only dimly imagine the Herculean effort behind this simple gesture.

It made me sad that he had to try so hard. I comforted myself with the knowledge that I wouldn’t be causing him pain much longer.

I heard Charlie approaching then, stamping his feet on the way to express his customary displeasure with

our guest. Edward's eyes snapped open and he let our hands fall, keeping them twined.

"Good evening, Charlie." Edward was always flawlessly polite, though Charlie didn't deserve it.

Charlie grunted at him, and then stood there with his arms crossed over his chest. He was taking the idea of parental supervision to extremes lately.

"I brought another set of applications," Edward told me then, holding up a stuffed manila envelope. He was wearing a roll of stamps like a ring around his littlest finger.

I groaned. How were there any colleges left that he hadn't forced me to apply to already? And how did he keep finding these loophole openings? It was so late in the year.

He smiled as if he could read my thoughts; they must have been very obvious on my face. "There are still a few open deadlines. And a few places willing to make exceptions."

I could just imagine the motivations behind such exceptions. And the dollar amounts involved.

Edward laughed at my expression.

"Shall we?" he asked, towing me toward the kitchen table.

Charlie huffed and followed behind, though he could hardly complain about the activity on tonight's agenda. He'd been pestering me to make a decision about college on a daily basis.

I cleared the table quickly while Edward organized an intimidating stack of forms. When I moved Wuthering Heights to the counter, Edward raised one eyebrow. I knew what he was thinking, but Charlie interrupted before Edward could comment.

“Speaking of college applications, Edward,” Charlie said, his tone even more sullen — he tried to avoid addressing Edward directly, and when he had to, it exacerbated his bad mood. “Bella and I were just talking about next year. Have you decided where you’re going to school?”

Edward smiled up at Charlie and his voice was friendly. “Not yet. I’ve received a few acceptance letters, but I’m still weighing my options.”

“Where have you been accepted?” Charlie pressed.

“Syracuse … Harvard … Dartmouth … and I just got accepted to the University of Alaska Southeast today.” Edward turned his face slightly to the side so that he could wink at me. I stifled a giggle.

“Harvard? Dartmouth?” Charlie mumbled, unable to conceal his awe. “Well that’s pretty … that’s something. Yeah, but the University of Alaska … you wouldn’t really consider that when you could go Ivy League. I mean, your father would want you to …”

“Carlisle’s always fine with whatever I choose to do,” Edward told him serenely.

“Hmph.”

“Guess what, Edward?” I asked in a bright voice, playing along.

“What, Bella?”

I pointed to the thick envelope on the counter. "I just got my acceptance to the University of Alaska!"

"Congratulations!" He grinned. "What a coincidence."

Charlie's eyes narrowed and he glared back and forth between the two of us. "Fine," he muttered after a minute. "I'm going to go watch the game, Bella. Nine-thirty."

That was his usual parting command.

"Er, Dad? Remember the very recent discussion about my freedom … ?"

He sighed. "Right. Okay, ten-thirty. You still have a curfew on school nights."

"Bella's no longer grounded?" Edward asked. Though I knew he wasn't really surprised, I couldn't detect any false note to the sudden excitement in his voice.

"Conditionally," Charlie corrected through his teeth. "What's it to you?"

I frowned at my dad, but he didn't see.

"It's just good to know," Edward said. "Alice has been itching for a shopping partner, and I'm sure Bella would love to see some city lights." He smiled at me.

But Charlie growled, "No!" and his face flushed purple.

"Dad! What's the problem?"

He made an effort to unclench his teeth. "I don't want you going to Seattle right now."

“Huh?”

“I told you about that story in the paper — there’s some kind of gang on a killing spree in Seattle and I want you to steer clear, okay?”

I rolled my eyes. “Dad, there’s a better chance that I’ll get struck by lightning than that the one day I’m in Seattle —”

“No, that’s fine, Charlie,” Edward said, interrupting me. “I didn’t mean Seattle. I was thinking Portland, actually. I wouldn’t have Bella in Seattle, either. Of course not.”

I looked at him in disbelief, but he had Charlie’s newspaper in his hands and he was reading the front page intently.

He must have been trying to appease my father. The idea of being in danger from even the most deadly of humans while I was with Alice or Edward was downright hilarious.

It worked. Charlie stared at Edward for one second more, and then shrugged. “Fine.” He stalked off toward the living room, in a bit of a hurry now — maybe he didn’t want to miss tip-off.

I waited till the TV was on, so that Charlie wouldn’t be able to hear me.

“What —,” I started to ask.

“Hold on,” Edward said without looking up from the paper. His eyes stayed focused on the page as he pushed the first application toward me across the table. “I think you can recycle your essays for this one. Same questions.”

Charlie must still be listening. I sighed and started to fill out the repetitive information: name, address, social… . After a few minutes I glanced up, but Edward was now staring pensively out the window. As I bent my head back to my work, I noticed for the first time the name of the school.

I snorted and shoved the papers aside.

“Bella?”

“Be serious, Edward. Dartmouth?”

Edward lifted the discarded application and laid it gently in front of me again. “I think you’d like New Hampshire,” he said. “There’s a full complement of night courses for me, and the forests are very conveniently located for the avid hiker. Plentiful wildlife.” He pulled out the crooked smile he knew I couldn’t resist.

I took a deep breath through my nose.

“I’ll let you pay me back, if that makes you happy,” he promised. “If you want, I can charge you interest.”

“Like I could even get in without some enormous bribe. Or was that part of the loan? The new Cullen wing of the library? Ugh. Why are we having this discussion again?”

“Will you just fill out the application, please, Bella? It won’t hurt you to apply.”

My jaw flexed. “You know what? I don’t think I will.”

I reached for the papers, planning to crumple them into a suitable shape for lobbing at the trashcan, but they were already gone. I stared at the empty table for

a moment, and then at Edward. He didn't appear to have moved, but the application was probably already tucked away in his jacket.

"What are you doing?" I demanded.

"I sign your name better than you do yourself. You've already written the essays."

"You're going way overboard with this, you know." I whispered on the off chance that Charlie wasn't completely lost in his game. "I really don't need to apply anywhere else. I've been accepted in Alaska. I can almost afford the first semester's tuition. It's as good an alibi as any. There's no need to throw away a bunch of money, no matter whose it is."

A pained looked tightened his face. "Bella —"

"Don't start. I agree that I need to go through the motions for Charlie's sake, but we both know I'm not going to be in any condition to go to school next fall. To be anywhere near people."

My knowledge of those first few years as a new vampire was sketchy. Edward had never gone into details — it wasn't his favorite subject — but I knew it wasn't pretty. Self-control was apparently an acquired skill. Anything more than correspondence school was out of the question.

"I thought the timing was still undecided," Edward reminded me softly. "You might enjoy a semester or two of college. There are a lot of human experiences you've never had."

"I'll get to those afterward."

“They won’t be human experiences afterward. You don’t get a second chance at humanity, Bella.”

I sighed. “You’ve got to be reasonable about the timing, Edward. It’s just too dangerous to mess around with.”

“There’s no danger yet,” he insisted.

I glared at him. No danger? Sure. I only had a sadistic vampire trying to avenge her mate’s death with my own, preferably through some slow and torturous method. Who was worried about Victoria? And, oh yeah, the Volturi — the vampire royal family with their small army of vampire warriors — who insisted that my heart stop beating one way or another in the near future, because humans weren’t allowed to know they existed. Right. No reason at all to panic.

Even with Alice keeping watch — Edward was relying on her uncannily accurate visions of the future to give us advance warning — it was insane to take chances.

Besides, I’d already won this argument. The date for my transformation was tentatively set for shortly after my graduation from high school, only a handful of weeks away.

A sharp jolt of unease pierced my stomach as I realized how short the time really was. Of course this change was necessary — and the key to what I wanted more than everything else in the world put together — but I was deeply conscious of Charlie sitting in the other room enjoying his game, just like every other night. And my mother, Renée, far away in sunny Florida, still pleading with me to spend the summer on the beach with her and her new husband. And Jacob, who, unlike my parents, would know exactly what was going on when I disappeared to

some distant school. Even if my parents didn't grow suspicious for a long time, even if I could put off visits with excuses about travel expenses or study loads or illnesses, Jacob would know the truth.

For a moment, the idea of Jacob's certain revulsion overshadowed every other pain.

"Bella," Edward murmured, his face twisting when he read the distress in mine. "There's no hurry. I won't let anyone hurt you. You can take all the time you need."

"I want to hurry," I whispered, smiling weakly, trying to make a joke of it. "I want to be a monster, too."

His teeth clenched; he spoke through them. "You have no idea what you're saying." Abruptly, he flung the damp newspaper onto the table in between us. His finger stabbed the headline on the front page:

DEATH TOLL ON THE RISE, POLICE FEAR GANG ACTIVITY

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Monsters are not a joke, Bella."

I stared at the headline again, and then up to his hard expression. "A … a vampire is doing this?" I whispered.

He smiled without humor. His voice was low and cold. "You'd be surprised, Bella, at how often my kind are the source behind the horrors in your human news. It's easy to recognize, when you know what to look for. The information here indicates a newborn vampire is loose in Seattle. Bloodthirsty, wild, out of control. The way we all were."

I let my gaze drop to the paper again, avoiding his eyes.

“We’ve been monitoring the situation for a few weeks. All the signs are there — the unlikely disappearances, always in the night, the poorly disposed-of corpses, the lack of other evidence… . Yes, someone brand-new. And no one seems to be taking responsibility for the neophyte… .” He took a deep breath. “Well, it’s not our problem. We wouldn’t even pay attention to the situation if wasn’t going on so close to home. Like I said, this happens all the time. The existence of monsters results in monstrous consequences.”

I tried not to see the names on the page, but they jumped out from the rest of the print like they were in bold. The five people whose lives were over, whose families were mourning now. It was different from considering murder in the abstract, reading those names. Maureen Gardiner, Geoffrey Campbell, Grace Razi, Michelle O’Connell, Ronald Albrook. People who’d had parents and children and friends and pets and jobs and hopes and plans and memories and futures… .

“It won’t be the same for me,” I whispered, half to myself. “You won’t let me be like that. We’ll live in Antarctica.”

Edward snorted, breaking the tension. “Penguins. Lovely.”

I laughed a shaky laugh and knocked the paper off the table so I wouldn’t have to see those names; it hit the linoleum with a thud. Of course Edward would consider the hunting possibilities. He and his “vegetarian” family — all committed to protecting human life — preferred the flavor of large predators for satisfying their dietary needs. “Alaska, then, as

planned. Only somewhere much more remote than Juneau — somewhere with grizzlies galore."

"Better," he allowed. "There are polar bears, too. Very fierce. And the wolves get quite large."

My mouth fell open and my breath blew out in a sharp gust.

"What's wrong?" he asked. Before I could recover, the confusion vanished and his whole body seemed to harden. "Oh. Never mind the wolves, then, if the idea is offensive to you." His voice was stiff, formal, his shoulders rigid.

"He was my best friend, Edward," I muttered. It stung to use the past tense. "Of course the idea offends me."

"Please forgive my thoughtlessness," he said, still very formal. "I shouldn't have suggested that."

"Don't worry about it." I stared at my hands, clenched into a double fist on the table.

We were both silent for a moment, and then his cool finger was under my chin, coaxing my face up. His expression was much softer now.

"Sorry. Really."

"I know. I know it's not the same thing. I shouldn't have reacted that way. It's just that … well, I was already thinking about Jacob before you came over." I hesitated. His tawny eyes seemed to get a little bit darker whenever I said Jacob's name. My voice turned pleading in response. "Charlie says Jake is having a hard time. He's hurting right now, and … it's my fault."

"You've done nothing wrong, Bella."

I took a deep breath. "I need to make it better, Edward. I owe him that. And it's one of Charlie's conditions, anyway —"

His face changed while I spoke, turning hard again, statue-like.

"You know it's out of the question for you to be around a werewolf unprotected, Bella. And it would break the treaty if any of us cross over onto their land. Do you want us to start a war?"

"Of course not!"

"Then there's really no point in discussing the matter further." He dropped his hand and looked away, searching for a subject change. His eyes paused on something behind me, and he smiled, though his eyes stayed wary.

"I'm glad Charlie has decided to let you out — you're sadly in need of a visit to the bookstore. I can't believe you're reading Wuthering Heights again. Don't you know it by heart yet?"

"Not all of us have photographic memories," I said curtly.

"Photographic memory or not, I don't understand why you like it. The characters are ghastly people who ruin each others' lives. I don't know how Heathcliff and Cathy ended up being ranked with couples like Romeo and Juliet or Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy. It isn't a love story, it's a hate story."

"You have some serious issues with the classics," I snapped.

"Perhaps it's because I'm not impressed by antiquity." He smiled, evidently satisfied that he'd distracted me. "Honestly, though, why do you read it over and over?" His eyes were vivid with real interest now, trying — again — to unravel the convoluted workings of my mind. He reached across the table to cradle my face in his hand. "What is it that appeals to you?"

His sincere curiosity disarmed me. "I'm not sure," I said, scrambling for coherency while his gaze unintentionally scattered my thoughts. "I think it's something about the inevitability. How nothing can keep them apart — not her selfishness, or his evil, or even death, in the end... ."

His face was thoughtful as he considered my words. After a moment he smiled a teasing smile. "I still think it would be a better story if either of them had one redeeming quality."

"I think that may be the point," I disagreed. "Their love is their only redeeming quality."

"I hope you have better sense than that — to fall in love with someone so ... malignant."

"It's a bit late for me to worry about who I fall in love with," I pointed out. "But even without the warning, I seem to have managed fairly well."

He laughed quietly. "I'm glad you think so."

"Well, I hope you're smart enough to stay away from someone so selfish. Catherine is really the source of all the trouble, not Heathcliff."

"I'll be on my guard," he promised.

I sighed. He was so good at distractions.

I put my hand over his to hold it to my face. "I need to see Jacob."

His eyes closed. "No."

"It's truly not dangerous at all," I said, pleading again. "I used to spend all day in La Push with the whole lot of them, and nothing ever happened."

But I made a slip; my voice faltered at the end because I realized as I was saying the words that they were a lie. It was not true that nothing had ever happened. A brief flash of memory — an enormous gray wolf crouched to spring, baring his dagger-like teeth at me — had my palms sweating with an echo of remembered panic.

Edward heard my heart accelerate and nodded as if I'd acknowledged the lie aloud. "Werewolves are unstable. Sometimes, the people near them get hurt. Sometimes, they get killed."

I wanted to deny it, but another image slowed my rebuttal. I saw in my head the once beautiful face of Emily Young, now marred by a trio of dark scars that dragged down the corner of her right eye and left her mouth warped forever into a lopsided scowl.

He waited, grimly triumphant, for me to find my voice.

"You don't know them," I whispered.

"I know them better than you think, Bella. I was here the last time."

"The last time?"

"We started crossing paths with the wolves about seventy years ago… . We had just settled near

Hoquiam. That was before Alice and Jasper were with us. We outnumbered them, but that wouldn't have stopped it from turning into a fight if not for Carlisle. He managed to convince Ephraim Black that coexisting was possible, and eventually we made the truce."

Jacob's great-grandfather's name startled me.

"We thought the line had died out with Ephraim," Edward muttered; it sounded like he was talking to himself now. "That the genetic quirk which allowed the transmutation had been lost... ." He broke off and stared at me accusingly. "Your bad luck seems to get more potent every day. Do you realize that your insatiable pull for all things deadly was strong enough to recover a pack of mutant canines from extinction? If we could bottle your luck, we'd have a weapon of mass destruction on our hands."

I ignored the ribbing, my attention caught by his assumption — was he serious? "But I didn't bring them back. Don't you know?"

"Know what?"

"My bad luck had nothing to do with it. The werewolves came back because the vampires did."

Edward stared at me, his body motionless with surprise.

"Jacob told me that your family being here set things in motion. I thought you would already know... ."

His eyes narrowed. "Is that what they think?"

"Edward, look at the facts. Seventy years ago, you came here, and the werewolves showed up. You come

back now, and the werewolves show up again. Do you think that's a coincidence?"

He blinked and his glare relaxed. "Carlisle will be interested in that theory."

"Theory," I scoffed.

He was silent for a moment, staring out the window into the rain; I imagined he was contemplating the fact that his family's presence was turning the locals into giant dogs.

"Interesting, but not exactly relevant," he murmured after a moment. "The situation remains the same."

I could translate that easily enough: no werewolf friends.

I knew I must be patient with Edward. It wasn't that he was unreasonable, it was just that he didn't understand. He had no idea how very much I owed Jacob Black — my life many times over, and possibly my sanity, too.

I didn't like to talk about that barren time with anyone, and especially not Edward. He had only been trying to save me when he'd left, trying to save my soul. I didn't hold him responsible for all the stupid things I'd done in his absence, or the pain I had suffered.

He did.

So I would have to word my explanation very carefully.

I got up and walked around the table. He opened his arms for me and I sat on his lap, nestling into his cool stone embrace. I looked at his hands while I spoke.

"Please just listen for a minute. This is so much more important than some whim to drop in on an old friend. Jacob is in pain." My voice distorted around the word. "I can't not try to help him — I can't give up on him now, when he needs me. Just because he's not human all the time… . Well, he was there for me when I was … not so human myself. You don't know what it was like… ." I hesitated. Edward's arms were rigid around me; his hands were in fists now, the tendons standing out. "If Jacob hadn't helped me … I'm not sure what you would have come home to. I owe him better than this, Edward."

I looked up at his face warily. His eyes were closed, and his jaw was strained.

"I'll never forgive myself for leaving you," he whispered. "Not if I live a hundred thousand years."

I put my hand against his cold face and waited until he sighed and opened his eyes.

"You were just trying to do the right thing. And I'm sure it would have worked with anyone less mental than me. Besides, you're here now. That's the part that matters."

"If I'd never left, you wouldn't feel the need to go risk your life to comfort a dog."

I flinched. I was used to Jacob and all his derogatory slurs — bloodsucker, leech, parasite… . Somehow it sounded harsher in Edward's velvet voice.

"I don't know how to phrase this properly," Edward said, and his tone was bleak. "It's going to sound cruel, I suppose. But I've come too close to losing you in the past. I know what it feels like to think I have. I am not going to tolerate anything dangerous."

"You have to trust me on this. I'll be fine."

His face was pained again. "Please, Bella," he whispered.

I stared into his suddenly burning golden eyes. "Please what?"

"Please, for me. Please make a conscious effort to keep yourself safe. I'll do everything I can, but I would appreciate a little help."

"I'll work on it," I murmured.

"Do you really have any idea how important you are to me? Any concept at all of how much I love you?" He pulled me tighter against his hard chest, tucking my head under his chin.

I pressed my lips against his snow-cold neck. "I know how much I love you," I answered.

"You compare one small tree to the entire forest."

I rolled my eyes, but he couldn't see. "Impossible."

He kissed the top of my head and sighed.

"No werewolves."

"I'm not going along with that. I have to see Jacob."

"Then I'll have to stop you."

He sounded utterly confident that this wouldn't be a problem.

I was sure he was right.

"We'll see about that," I bluffed anyway. "He's still my friend."

I could feel Jacob's note in my pocket, like it suddenly weighed ten pounds. I could hear the words in his voice, and he seemed to be agreeing with Edward — something that would never happen in reality.

Doesn't change anything. Sorry.

# Chapter 2

## EVASION

I felt oddly buoyant as I walked from Spanish toward the cafeteria, and it wasn't just because I was holding hands with the most perfect person on the planet, though that was certainly part of it.

Maybe it was the knowledge that my sentence was served and I was a free woman again.

Or maybe it wasn't anything to do with me specifically. Maybe it was the atmosphere of freedom that hung over the entire campus. School was winding down, and, for the senior class especially, there was a perceptible thrill in the air.

Freedom was so close it was touchable, taste-able. Signs of it were everywhere. Posters crowded together on the cafeteria walls, and the trashcans wore a colorful skirt of spilled-over fliers: reminders to buy yearbooks, class rings, and announcements; deadlines to order graduation gowns, hats, and tassels; neon-bright sales pitches — the juniors campaigning for class office; ominous, rose-wreathed advertisements for this year's prom. The big dance was this coming weekend, but I had an ironclad promise from Edward that I would not be subjected to that again. After all, I'd already had that human experience.

No, it must be my personal freedom that lightened me today. The ending of the school year did not give me the pleasure it seemed to give the other students. Actually, I felt nervous to the point of nausea whenever I thought of it. I tried to not think of it.

But it was hard to escape such an omnipresent topic as graduation.

"Have you sent your announcements, yet?" Angela asked when Edward and I sat down at our table. She had her light brown hair pulled back into a sloppy ponytail instead of her usual smooth hairdo, and there was a slightly frantic look about her eyes.

Alice and Ben were already there, too, on either side of Angela. Ben was intent over a comic book, his glasses sliding down his narrow nose. Alice was scrutinizing my boring jeans-and-a-t-shirt outfit in a way that made me self-conscious. Probably plotting another makeover. I sighed. My indifferent attitude to fashion was a constant thorn in her side. If I'd allow it, she'd love to dress me every day — perhaps several times a day — like some oversized three-dimensional paper doll.

"No," I answered Angela. "There's no point, really. Renée knows when I'm graduating. Who else is there?"

"How about you, Alice?"

Alice smiled. "All done."

"Lucky you." Angela sighed. "My mother has a thousand cousins and she expects me to hand-address one to everybody. I'm going to get carpal tunnel. I can't put it off any longer and I'm just dreading it."

"I'll help you," I volunteered. "If you don't mind my awful handwriting."

Charlie would like that. From the corner of my eye, I saw Edward smile. He must like that, too — me

fulfilling Charlie's conditions without involving werewolves.

Angela looked relieved. "That's so nice of you. I'll come over any time you want."

"Actually, I'd rather go to your house if that's okay — I'm sick of mine. Charlie un-grounded me last night." I grinned as I announced my good news.

"Really?" Angela asked, mild excitement lighting her always-gentle brown eyes. "I thought you said you were in for life."

"I'm more surprised than you are. I was sure I would at least have finished high school before he set me free."

"Well, this is great, Bella! We'll have to go out to celebrate."

"You have no idea how good that sounds."

"What should we do?" Alice mused, her face lighting up at the possibilities. Alice's ideas were usually a little grandiose for me, and I could see it in her eyes now — the tendency to take things too far kicking into action.

"Whatever you're thinking, Alice, I doubt I'm that free."

"Free is free, right?" she insisted.

"I'm sure I still have boundaries — like the continental U.S., for example."

Angela and Ben laughed, but Alice grimaced in real disappointment.

“So what are we doing tonight?” she persisted.

“Nothing. Look, let’s give it a couple of days to make sure he wasn’t joking. It’s a school night, anyway.”

“We’ll celebrate this weekend, then.” Alice’s enthusiasm was impossible to repress.

“Sure,” I said, hoping to placate her. I knew I wasn’t going to do anything too outlandish; it would be safer to take it slow with Charlie. Give him a chance to appreciate how trustworthy and mature I was before I asked for any favors.

Angela and Alice started talking about options; Ben joined the conversation, setting his comics aside. My attention drifted. I was surprised to find that the subject of my freedom was suddenly not as gratifying as it had been just a moment ago. While they discussed things to do in Port Angeles or maybe Hoquiam, I began to feel disgruntled.

It didn’t take long to determine where my restlessness stemmed from.

Ever since I’d said goodbye to Jacob Black in the forest outside my home, I’d been plagued by a persistent, uncomfortable intrusion of a specific mental picture. It popped into my thoughts at regular intervals like some annoying alarm clock set to sound every half hour, filling my head with the image of Jacob’s face crumpled in pain. This was the last memory I had of him.

As the disturbing vision struck again, I knew exactly why I was dissatisfied with my liberty. Because it was incomplete.

Sure, I was free to go to anywhere I wanted — except La Push; free to do anything I wanted — except see Jacob. I frowned at the table. There had to be some kind of middle ground.

“Alice? Alice!”

Angela’s voice yanked me from my reverie. She was waving her hand back and forth in front of Alice’s blank, staring face. Alice’s expression was something I recognized — an expression that sent an automatic shock of panic through my body. The vacant look in her eyes told me that she was seeing something very different from the mundane lunchroom scene that surrounded us, but something that was every bit as real in its own way. Something that was coming, something that would happen soon. I felt the blood slither from my face.

Then Edward laughed, a very natural, relaxed sound. Angela and Ben looked toward him, but my eyes were locked on Alice. She jumped suddenly, as if someone had kicked her under the table.

“Is it naptime already, Alice?” Edward teased.

Alice was herself again. “Sorry, I was daydreaming, I guess.”

“Daydreaming’s better than facing two more hours of school,” Ben said.

Alice threw herself back into the conversation with more animation than before — just a little bit too much. Once I saw her eyes lock with Edward’s, only for a moment, and then she looked back to Angela before anyone else noticed. Edward was quiet, playing absentmindedly with a strand of my hair.

I waited anxiously for a chance to ask Edward what Alice had seen in her vision, but the afternoon passed without one minute of alone time.

It felt odd to me, almost deliberate. After lunch, Edward slowed his pace to match Ben's, talking about some assignment I knew he'd already finished. Then there was always someone else there between classes, though we usually had a few minutes to ourselves. When the final bell rang, Edward struck up a conversation with Mike Newton of all people, falling into step beside him as Mike headed for the parking lot. I trailed behind, letting Edward tow me along.

I listened, confused, while Mike answered Edward's unusually friendly queries. It seemed Mike was having car troubles.

"… but I just replaced the battery," Mike was saying. His eyes darted ahead and then back to Edward warily. Mystified, just like I was.

"Perhaps it's the cables?" Edward offered.

"Maybe. I really don't know anything about cars," Mike admitted. "I need to have someone look at it, but I can't afford to take it to Dowling's."

I opened my mouth to suggest my mechanic, and then snapped it shut again. My mechanic was busy these days — busy running around as a giant wolf.

"I know a few things — I could take a look, if you like," Edward offered. "Just let me drop Alice and Bella at home."

Mike and I both stared at Edward with our mouths hanging open.

“Er … thanks,” Mike mumbled when he recovered. “But I have to get to work. Maybe some other time.”

“Absolutely.”

“See ya.” Mike climbed into his car, shaking his head in disbelief.

Edward’s Volvo, with Alice already inside, was just two cars away.

“What was that about?” I muttered as Edward held the passenger door for me.

“Just being helpful,” Edward answered.

And then Alice, waiting in the backseat, was babbling at top speed.

“You’re really not that good a mechanic, Edward. Maybe you should have Rosalie take a look at it tonight, just so you look good if Mike decides to let you help, you know. Not that it wouldn’t be fun to watch his face if Rosalie showed up to help. But since Rosalie is supposed to be across the country attending college, I guess that’s not the best idea. Too bad. Though I suppose, for Mike’s car, you’ll do. It’s only within the finer tunings of a good Italian sports car that you’re out of your depth. And speaking of Italy and sports cars that I stole there, you still owe me a yellow Porsche. I don’t know that I want to wait for Christmas… .”

I stopped listening after a minute, letting her quick voice become just a hum in the background as I settled into my patient mode.

It looked to me like Edward was trying to avoid my questions. Fine. He would have to be alone with me soon enough. It was only a matter of time.

Edward seemed to realize that, too. He dropped Alice at the mouth of the Cullens' drive as usual, though by this point I half expected him to drive her to the door and walk her in.

As she got out, Alice threw a sharp look at his face. Edward seemed completely at ease.

"See you later," he said. And then, ever so slightly, he nodded.

Alice turned to disappear into the trees.

He was quiet as he turned the car around and headed back to Forks. I waited, wondering if he would bring it up himself. He didn't, and this made me tense. What had Alice seen today at lunch? Something he didn't want to tell me, and I tried to think of a reason why he would keep secrets. Maybe it would be better to prepare myself before I asked. I didn't want to freak out and have him think I couldn't handle it, whatever it was.

So we were both silent until we got to back to Charlie's house.

"Light homework load tonight," he commented.

"Mmm," I assented.

"Do you suppose I'm allowed inside again?"

"Charlie didn't throw a fit when you picked me up for school."

But I was sure Charlie was going to turn sulky fast when he got home and found Edward here. Maybe I should make something extra-special for dinner.

Inside, I headed up the stairs, and Edward followed. He lounged on my bed and gazed out the window, seeming oblivious to my edginess.

I stowed my bag and turned the computer on. There was an unanswered e-mail from my mom to attend to, and she got panicky when I took too long. I drummed my fingers as I waited for my decrepit computer to wheeze awake; they snapped against the desk, staccato and anxious.

And then his fingers were on mine, holding them still.

“Are we a little impatient today?” he murmured.

I looked up, intending to make a sarcastic remark, but his face was closer than I’d expected. His golden eyes were smoldering, just inches away, and his breath was cool against my open lips. I could taste his scent on my tongue.

I couldn’t remember the witty response I’d been about to make. I couldn’t remember my name.

He didn’t give me a chance to recover.

If I had my way, I would spend the majority of my time kissing Edward. There wasn’t anything I’d experienced in my life that compared to the feeling of his cool lips, marble hard but always so gentle, moving with mine.

I didn’t often get my way.

So it surprised me a little when his fingers braided themselves into my hair, securing my face to his. My arms locked behind his neck, and I wished I was stronger — strong enough to keep him prisoner here. One hand slid down my back, pressing me tighter against his stone chest. Even through his sweater, his skin was cold enough to make me shiver — it was a shiver of pleasure, of happiness, but his hands began to loosen in response.

I knew I had about three seconds before he would sigh and slide me deftly away, saying something about how we'd risked my life enough for one afternoon. Making the most of my last seconds, I crushed myself closer, molding myself to the shape of him. The tip of my tongue traced the curve of his lower lip; it was as flawlessly smooth as if it had been polished, and the taste —

He pulled my face away from his, breaking my hold with ease — he probably didn't even realize that I was using all my strength.

He chuckled once, a low, throaty sound. His eyes were bright with the excitement he so rigidly disciplined.

"Ah, Bella." He sighed.

"I'd say I'm sorry, but I'm not."

"And I should feel sorry that you're not sorry, but I don't. Maybe I should go sit on the bed."

I exhaled a little dizzily. "If you think that's necessary... ."

He smiled crookedly and disentangled himself.

I shook my head a few times, trying to clear it, and turned back to my computer. It was all warmed up and humming now. Well, not as much humming as groaning.

“Tell Renée I said hello.”

“Sure thing.”

I scanned through Renée’s e-mail, shaking my head now and then at some of the dippier things she’d done. I was just as entertained and horrified as the first time I’d read this. It was so like my mother to forget exactly how paralyzed she was by heights until she was already strapped to a parachute and a dive instructor. I felt a little frustrated with Phil, her husband of almost two years, for allowing that one. I would have taken better care of her. I knew her so much better.

You have to let them go their own way eventually, I reminded myself. You have to let them have their own life… .

I’d spent most of my life taking care of Renée, patiently guiding her away from her craziest plans, good-naturedly enduring the ones I couldn’t talk her out of. I’d always been indulgent with my mom, amused by her, even a little condescending to her. I saw her cornucopia of mistakes and laughed privately to myself. Scatterbrained Renée.

I was a very different person from my mother. Someone thoughtful and cautious. The responsible one, the grown-up. That’s how I saw myself. That was the person I knew.

With the blood still pounding in my head from Edward’s kiss, I couldn’t help but think of my

mother's most life-altering mistake. Silly and romantic, getting married fresh out of high school to a man she barely knew, then producing me a year later. She'd always promised me that she had no regrets, that I was the best gift her life had ever given her. And yet she'd drilled it into me over and over — smart people took marriage seriously. Mature people went to college and started careers before they got deeply involved in a relationship. She knew I would never be as thoughtless and goofy and small-town as she'd been… .

I gritted my teeth and tried to concentrate as I answered her letter.

Then I hit her parting line and remembered why I'd neglected to write sooner.

You haven't said anything about Jacob in a long time, she'd written. What's he up to these days?

Charlie was prompting her, I was sure.

I sighed and typed quickly, tucking the answer to her question between two less sensitive paragraphs.

Jacob is fine, I guess. I don't see him much; he spends most of his time with a pack of his friends down at La Push these days.

Smiling wryly to myself, I added Edward's greeting and hit "send."

I didn't realize that Edward was standing silently behind me again until after I'd turned off the computer and shoved away from the desk. I was about to scold him for reading over my shoulder when I realized that he wasn't paying any attention to me. He was examining a flat black box with wires curling

crookedly away from the main square in a way that didn't look healthy for whatever it was. After a second, I recognized the car stereo Emmett, Rosalie, and Jasper had given me for my last birthday. I'd forgotten about the birthday presents hiding under a growing pile of dust on the floor of my closet.

"What did you do to this?" he asked in a horrorstruck voice.

"It didn't want to come out of the dashboard."

"So you felt the need to torture it?"

"You know how I am with tools. No pain was inflicted intentionally."

He shook his head, his face a mask of faux tragedy. "You killed it."

I shrugged. "Oh, well."

"It would hurt their feelings if they saw this," he said. "I guess it's a good thing that you've been on house arrest. I'll have to get another one in place before they notice."

"Thanks, but I don't need a fancy stereo."

"It's not for your sake that I'm going to replace it."

I sighed.

"You didn't get much good out of your birthday presents last year," he said in a disgruntled voice. Suddenly, he was fanning himself with a stiff rectangle of paper.

I didn't answer, for fear my voice would shake. My disastrous eighteenth birthday — with all its far-reaching consequences — wasn't something I cared to remember, and I was surprised that he would bring it up. He was even more sensitive about it than I was.

"Do you realize these are about to expire?" he asked, holding the paper out to me. It was another present — the voucher for airplane tickets that Esme and Carlisle had given me so that I could visit Renée in Florida.

I took a deep breath and answered in a flat voice. "No. I'd forgotten all about them, actually."

His expression was carefully bright and positive; there was no trace of any deep emotion as he continued. "Well, we still have a little time. You've been liberated ... and we have no plans this weekend, as you refuse to go to the prom with me." He grinned. "Why not celebrate your freedom this way?"

I gasped. "By going to Florida?"

"You did say something about the continental U.S. being allowable."

I glared at him, suspicious, trying to understand where this had come from.

"Well?" he demanded. "Are we going to see Renée or not?"

"Charlie will never allow it."

"Charlie can't keep you from visiting your mother. She still has primary custody."

"Nobody has custody of me. I'm an adult."

He flashed a brilliant smile. “Exactly.”

I thought it over for a short minute before deciding that it wasn’t worth the fight. Charlie would be furious — not that I was going to see Renée, but that Edward was going with me. Charlie wouldn’t speak to me for months, and I’d probably end up grounded again. It was definitely smarter not to even bring it up. Maybe in a few weeks, as a graduation favor or something.

But the idea of seeing my mother now, not weeks from now, was hard to resist. It had been so long since I’d seen Renée. And even longer since I’d seen her under pleasant circumstances. The last time I’d been with her in Phoenix, I’d spent the whole time in a hospital bed. The last time she’d come here, I’d been more or less catatonic. Not exactly the best memories to leave her with.

And maybe, if she saw how happy I was with Edward, she would tell Charlie to ease up.

Edward scrutinized my face while I deliberated.

I sighed. “Not this weekend.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t want to fight with Charlie. Not so soon after he’s forgiven me.”

His eyebrows pulled together. “I think this weekend is perfect,” he muttered.

I shook my head. “Another time.”

“You aren’t the only one who’s been trapped in this house, you know.” He frowned at me.

Suspicion returned. This kind of behavior was unlike him. He was always so impossibly selfless; I knew it was making me spoiled.

“You can go anywhere you want,” I pointed out.

“The outside world holds no interest for me without you.”

I rolled my eyes at the hyperbole.

“I’m serious,” he said.

“Let’s take the outside world slowly, all right? For example, we could start with a movie in Port Angeles… .”

He groaned. “Never mind. We’ll talk about it later.”

“There’s nothing left to talk about.”

He shrugged.

“Okay, then, new subject,” I said. I’d almost forgotten my worries about this afternoon — had that been his intention? “What did Alice see today at lunch?”

My eyes were fixed on his face as I spoke, measuring his reaction.

His expression was composed; there was only the slightest hardening of his topaz eyes. “She’s been seeing Jasper in a strange place, somewhere in the southwest, she thinks, near his former … family. But he has no conscious intentions to go back.” He sighed. “It’s got her worried.”

“Oh.” That was nothing close to what I’d been expecting. But of course it made sense that Alice

would be watching out for Jasper's future. He was her soul mate, her true other half, though they weren't as flamboyant about their relationship as Rosalie and Emmett were. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I didn't realize you'd noticed," he said. "It's probably nothing important, in any case."

My imagination was sadly out of control. I'd taken a perfectly normal afternoon and twisted it until it looked like Edward was going out of his way to keep things from me. I needed therapy.

We went downstairs to work on our homework, just in case Charlie showed up early. Edward finished in minutes; I slogged laboriously through my calculus until I decided it was time to fix Charlie's dinner. Edward helped, making faces every so often at the raw ingredients — human food was mildly repulsive to him. I made stroganoff from Grandma Swan's recipe, because I was sucking up. It wasn't one of my favorites, but it would please Charlie.

Charlie seemed to already be in a good mood when he got home. He didn't even go out of his way to be rude to Edward. Edward excused himself from eating with us, as usual. The sound of the nightly news drifted from the front room, but I doubted Edward was really watching.

After forcing down three helpings, Charlie kicked his feet up on the spare chair and folded his hands contentedly across his distended stomach.

"That was great, Bells."

"I'm glad you liked it. How was work?" He'd been eating with too much concentration for me to make conversation before.

"Sort of slow. Well, dead slow really. Mark and I played cards for a good part of the afternoon," he admitted with a grin. "I won, nineteen hands to seven. And then I was on the phone with Billy for a while."

I tried to keep my expression the same. "How is he?"

"Good, good. His joints are bothering him a little."

"Oh. That's too bad."

"Yeah. He invited us down to visit this weekend. He was thinking of having the Clearwaters and the Uleys over too. Sort of a playoff party... ."

"Huh," was my genius response. But what could I say? I knew I wouldn't be allowed to hit a werewolf party, even with parental supervision. I wondered if Edward would have a problem with Charlie hanging out in La Push. Or would he suppose that, since Charlie was mostly spending time with Billy, who was only human, my father wouldn't be in danger?

I got up and piled the dishes together without looking at Charlie. I dumped them into the sink and started the water. Edward appeared silently and grabbed a dishtowel.

Charlie sighed and gave up for the moment, though I imagined he would revisit the subject when we were alone again. He heaved himself to his feet and headed for the TV, just like every other night.

"Charlie," Edward said in a conversational tone.

Charlie stopped in the middle of his little kitchen. "Yeah?"

"Did Bella ever tell you that my parents gave her airplane tickets on her last birthday, so that she could visit Renée?"

I dropped the plate I was scrubbing. It glanced off the counter and clattered noisily to the floor. It didn't break, but it spattered the room, and all three of us, with soapy water. Charlie didn't even seem to notice.

"Bella?" he asked in a stunned voice.

I kept my eyes on the plate as I retrieved it. "Yeah, they did."

Charlie swallowed loudly, and then his eyes narrowed as he turned back to Edward. "No, she never mentioned it."

"Hmm," Edward murmured.

"Was there a reason you brought it up?" Charlie asked in a hard voice.

Edward shrugged. "They're about to expire. I think it might hurt Esme's feelings if Bella doesn't use her gift. Not that she'd say anything."

I stared at Edward in disbelief.

Charlie thought for a minute. "It's probably a good idea for you to visit your mom, Bella. She'd love that. I'm surprised you didn't say anything about this, though."

"I forgot," I admitted.

He frowned. "You forgot that someone gave you plane tickets?"

"Mmm," I murmured vaguely, and turned back to the sink.

"I noticed that you said they're about to expire, Edward," Charlie went on. "How many tickets did your parents give her?"

"Just one for her … and one for me."

The plate I dropped this time landed in the sink, so it didn't make as much noise. I could easily hear the sharp huff as my father exhaled. The blood rushed into my face, fueled by irritation and chagrin. Why was Edward doing this? I glared at the bubbles in the sink, panicking.

"That's out of the question!" Charlie was abruptly in a rage, shouting the words.

"Why?" Edward asked, his voice saturated with innocent surprise. "You just said it was a good idea for her to see her mother."

Charlie ignored him. "You're not going anywhere with him, young lady!" he yelled. I spun around and he was jabbing a finger at me.

Anger pulsed through me automatically, an instinctive reaction to his tone.

"I'm not a child, Dad. And I'm not grounded anymore, remember?"

"Oh yes, you are. Starting now."

"For what?!"

"Because I said so."

"Do I need to remind you that I'm a legal adult, Charlie?"

"This is my house — you follow my rules!"

My glare turned icy. "If that's how you want it. Do you want me to move out tonight? Or can I have a few days to pack?"

Charlie's face went bright red. I instantly felt horrible for playing the move-out card.

I took a deep breath and tried to make my tone more reasonable. "I'll do my time without complaining when I've done something wrong, Dad, but I'm not going to put up with your prejudices."

He sputtered, but managed nothing coherent.

"Now, I know that you know that I have every right to see Mom for the weekend. You can't honestly tell me you'd object to the plan if I was going with Alice or Angela."

"Girls," he grunted, with a nod.

"Would it bother you if I took Jacob?"

I'd only picked the name because I knew of my father's preference for Jacob, but I quickly wished I hadn't; Edward's teeth clenched together with an audible snap.

My father struggled to compose himself before he answered. "Yes," he said in an unconvincing voice. "That would bother me."

"You're a rotten liar, Dad."

"Bella —"

"It's not like I'm headed off to Vegas to be a showgirl or anything. I'm going to see Mom," I reminded him. "She's just as much my parental authority as you are."

He threw me a withering look.

"Are you implying something about Mom's ability to look after me?"

Charlie flinched at the threat implicit in my question.

"You'd better hope I don't mention this to her," I said.

"You'd better not," he warned. "I'm not happy about this, Bella."

"There's no reason for you to be upset."

He rolled his eyes, but I could tell the storm was over.

I turned to pull the plug out of the sink. "So my homework is done, your dinner is done, the dishes are done, and I'm not grounded. I'm going out. I'll be back before ten-thirty."

"Where are you going?" His face, almost back to normal, flushed light red again.

"I'm not sure," I admitted. "I'll keep it within a ten-mile radius, though. Okay?"

He grunted something that did not sound like approval, and stalked out of the room. Naturally, as soon as I'd won the fight, I began to feel guilty.

"We're going out?" Edward asked, his voice low but enthusiastic.

I turned to glower at him. "Yes. I think I'd like to speak to you alone."

He didn't look as apprehensive as I thought he should.

I waited to begin until we were safely in his car.

"What was that?" I demanded.

"I know you want to see your mother, Bella — you've been talking about her in your sleep. Worrying actually."

"I have?"

He nodded. "But, clearly, you were too much of a coward to deal with Charlie, so I interceded on your behalf."

"Interceded? You threw me to the sharks!"

He rolled his eyes. "I don't think you were in any danger."

"I told you I didn't want to fight with Charlie."

"Nobody said that you had to."

I glowered at him. "I can't help myself when he gets all bossy like that — my natural teenage instincts overpower me."

He chuckled. "Well, that's not my fault."

I stared at him, speculating. He didn't seem to notice. His face was serene as he gazed out the windshield. Something was off, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Or maybe it was just my imagination again, running wild like it had this afternoon.

"Does this sudden urge to see Florida have anything to do with the party at Billy's place?"

His jaw flexed. "Nothing at all. It wouldn't matter if you were here or on the other side of the world, you still wouldn't be going."

It was just like with Charlie before — just like being treated as a misbehaving child. I gritted my teeth together so I wouldn't start shouting. I didn't want to fight with Edward, too.

Edward sighed, and when he spoke his voice was warm and velvet again. "So what do you want to do tonight?" he asked.

"Can we go to your house? I haven't seen Esme in so long."

He smiled. "She'll like that. Especially when she hears what we're doing this weekend."

I groaned in defeat.

We didn't stay out late, as I'd promised. I was not surprised to see the lights still on when we pulled up in front of the house — I knew Charlie would be waiting to yell at me some more.

"You'd better not come inside," I said. "It will only make things worse."

"His thoughts are relatively calm," Edward teased. His expression made me wonder if there was some additional joke I was missing. The corners of his mouth twitched, fighting a smile.

"I'll see you later," I muttered glumly.

He laughed and kissed the top of my head. "I'll be back when Charlie's snoring."

The TV was loud when I got inside. I briefly considered trying to sneak past him.

"Could you come in here, Bella?" Charlie called, sinking that plan.

My feet dragged as I took the five necessary steps.

"What's up, Dad?"

"Did you have a nice time tonight?" he asked. He seemed ill at ease. I looked for hidden meanings in his words before I answered.

"Yes," I said hesitantly.

"What did you do?"

I shrugged. "Hung out with Alice and Jasper. Edward beat Alice at chess, and then I played Jasper. He buried me."

I smiled. Edward and Alice playing chess was one of the funniest things I'd ever seen. They'd sat there nearly motionless, staring at the board, while Alice foresaw the moves he would make and he picked the moves she would make in return out of her head. They played most of the game in their minds; I think they'd each moved two pawns when Alice suddenly

flicked her king over and surrendered. It took all of three minutes.

Charlie hit the mute button — an unusual action.

“Look, there’s something I need to say.” He frowned, looking very uncomfortable.

I sat still, waiting. He met my gaze for a second before shifting his eyes to the floor. He didn’t say anything more.

“What is it, Dad?”

He sighed. “I’m not good at this kind of thing. I don’t know how to start… .”

I waited again.

“Okay, Bella. Here’s the thing.” He got up from the couch and started pacing back and forth across the room, looking as his feet all the time. “You and Edward seem pretty serious, and there are some things that you need to be careful about. I know you’re an adult now, but you’re still young, Bella, and there are a lot of important things you need to know when you … well, when you’re physically involved with —”

“Oh, please, please no!” I begged, jumping to my feet. “Please tell me you are not trying to have a sex talk with me, Charlie.”

He glared at the floor. “I am your father. I have responsibilities. Remember, I’m just as embarrassed as you are.”

"I don't think that's humanly possible. Anyway, Mom beat you to the punch about ten years ago. You're off the hook."

"Ten years ago you didn't have a boyfriend," he muttered unwillingly. I could tell he was battling with his desire to drop the subject. We were both standing up, looking at the floor, and facing away from each other.

"I don't think the essentials have changed that much," I mumbled, and my face had to be as red as his. This was beyond the seventh circle of Hades; even worse was realizing that Edward had known this was coming. No wonder he'd seemed so smug in the car.

"Just tell me that you two are being responsible," Charlie pled, obviously wishing a pit would open in the floor so that he could fall in.

"Don't worry about it, Dad, it's not like that."

"Not that I don't trust you, Bella, but I know you don't want to tell me anything about this, and you know I don't really want to hear it. I will try to be open-minded, though. I know the times have changed."

I laughed awkwardly. "Maybe the times have, but Edward is very old-fashioned. You have nothing to worry about."

Charlie sighed. "Sure he is," he muttered.

"Ugh!" I groaned. "I really wish you were not forcing me to say this out loud, Dad. Really. But … I am a … virgin, and I have no immediate plans to change that status."

We both cringed, but then Charlie's face smoothed out. He seemed to believe me.

"Can I go to bed, now? Please."

"In a minute," he said.

"Aw, please, Dad? I'm begging you."

"The embarrassing part's over, I promise," he assured me.

I shot a glance at him, and was grateful to see that he looked more relaxed, that his face was back to its regular color. He sank down onto the sofa, sighing with relief that he was past the sex speech.

"What now?"

"I just wanted to know how the balance thing is coming along."

"Oh. Good, I guess. I made plans with Angela today. I'm going to help her with her graduation announcements. Just us girls."

"That's nice. And what about Jake?"

I sighed. "I haven't figured that one out yet, Dad."

"Keep trying, Bella. I know you'll do the right thing. You're a good person."

Nice. So if I didn't figure out some way to make things right with Jacob, then I was a bad person? That was below the belt.

"Sure, sure," I agreed. The automatic response almost made me smile — it was something I'd picked up from

Jacob. I even said it in the same patronizing tone he used with his own father.

Charlie grinned and turned the sound back on. He slumped lower into the cushions, pleased with his night's work. I could tell he would be up with the game for a while.

"'Night, Bells."

"See you in the morning!" I sprinted for the stairs.

Edward was long gone and he wouldn't be back until Charlie was asleep — he was probably out hunting or something to pass the time — so I was in no hurry to undress for bed. I wasn't in the mood to be alone, but I certainly wasn't going to go back downstairs to hang out with my Dad, just in case he thought of some topic of sex education that he hadn't touched on before; I shuddered.

So, thanks to Charlie, I was wound up and anxious. My homework was done and I didn't feel mellow enough for reading or just listening to music. I considered calling Renée with the news of my visit, but then I realized that it was three hours later in Florida, and she would be asleep.

I could call Angela, I supposed.

But suddenly I knew that it wasn't Angela that I wanted to talk to. That I needed to talk to.

I stared at the blank black window, biting my lip. I don't know how long I stood there weighing the pros against the cons — doing the right thing by Jacob, seeing my closest friend again, being a good person, versus making Edward furious with me. Ten minutes maybe. Long enough to decide that the pros were

valid while the cons were not. Edward was only concerned about my safety, and I knew that there was really no problem on that count.

The phone wasn't any help; Jacob had refused to answer my phone calls since Edward's return. Besides, I needed to see him — see him smiling again the way he used to. I needed to replace that awful last memory of his face warped and twisted by pain if I was ever going to have any peace of mind.

I had an hour probably. I could make a quick run down to La Push and be back before Edward realized I had gone. It was past my curfew, but would Charlie really care about that when Edward wasn't involved? One way to find out.

I grabbed my jacket and shoved my arms through the sleeves as I ran down the stairs.

Charlie looked up from the game, instantly suspicious.

"You care if I go see Jake tonight?" I asked breathlessly. "I won't stay long."

As soon as I said Jake's name, Charlie's expression relaxed into a smug smile. He didn't seem surprised at all that his lecture had taken effect so quickly. "Sure, kid. No problem. Stay as long as you like."

"Thanks, Dad," I said as I darted out the door.

Like any fugitive, I couldn't help looking over my shoulder a few times while I jogged to my truck, but the night was so black that there really was no point. I had to feel my way along the side of the truck to the handle.

My eyes were just beginning to adjust as I shoved my keys in the ignition. I twisted them hard to the left, but instead of roaring deafeningly to life, the engine just clicked. I tried it again with the same results.

And then a small motion in my peripheral vision made me jump.

“Gah!” I gasped in shock when I saw that I was not alone in the cab.

Edward sat very still, a faint bright spot in the darkness, only his hands moving as he turned a mysterious black object around and around. He stared at the object as he spoke.

“Alice called,” he murmured.

Alice! Damn. I’d forgotten to account for her in my plans. He must have her watching me.

“She got nervous when your future rather abruptly disappeared five minutes ago.”

My eyes, already wide with surprise, popped wider.

“Because she can’t see the wolves, you know,” he explained in the same low murmur. “Had you forgotten that? When you decide to mingle your fate with theirs, you disappear, too. You couldn’t know that part, I realize that. But can you understand why that might make me a little … anxious? Alice saw you disappear, and she couldn’t even tell if you’d come home or not. Your future got lost, just like theirs.

“We’re not sure why this is. Some natural defense they’re born with?” He spoke as if he were talking to himself now, still looking at the piece of my truck’s engine as he twirled it in his hands. “That doesn’t

seem entirely likely, since I haven't had any trouble reading their thoughts. The Blacks' at least. Carlisle theorizes that it's because their lives are so ruled by their transformations. It's more an involuntary reaction than a decision. Utterly unpredictable, and it changes everything about them. In that instant when they shift from one form to the other, they don't really even exist. The future can't hold them... ."

I listened to his musing in stony silence.

"I'll put your car back together in time for school, in case you'd like to drive yourself," he assured me after a minute.

With my lips mashed together, I retrieved my keys and stiffly climbed out of the truck.

"Shut your window if you want me to stay away tonight. I'll understand," he whispered just before I slammed the door.

I stomped into the house, slamming that door, too.

"What's wrong?" Charlie demanded from the couch.

"Truck won't start," I growled.

"Want me to look at it?"

"No. I'll try it in the morning."

"Want to use my car?"

I wasn't supposed to drive his police cruiser. Charlie must be really desperate to get me to La Push. Nearly as desperate as I was.

"No. I'm tired," I grumbled. "'Night."

I stamped my way up the stairs, and went straight to my window. I shoved the metal frame roughly — it crashed shut and the glass trembled.

I stared at the shivering black glass for a long moment, until it was still. Then I sighed, and opened the window as wide as it would go.

# Chapter 3

## MOTIVES

The sun was so deeply buried behind the clouds that there was no way to tell if it had set or not. After the long flight — chasing the sun westward so that it seemed unmoving in the sky — it was especially disorienting; time seemed oddly variable. It took me by surprise when the forest gave way to the first buildings, signaling that we were nearly home.

“You’ve been very quiet,” Edward observed. “Did the plane make you sick?”

“No, I’m okay.”

“Are you sad to leave?”

“More relieved than sad, I think.”

He raised one eyebrow at me. I knew it was useless and — much as I hated to admit it — unnecessary to ask him to keep his eyes on the road.

“Renée is so much more … perceptive than Charlie in some ways. It was making me jumpy.”

Edward laughed. “Your mother has a very interesting mind. Almost childlike, but very insightful. She sees things differently than other people.”

Insightful. It was a good description of my mother — when she was paying attention. Most of the time Renée was so bewildered by her own life that she didn’t notice much else. But this weekend she’d been paying plenty of attention to me.

Phil was busy — the high school baseball team he coached was in the playoffs — and being alone with Edward and me had only sharpened Renée's focus. As soon as the hugs and squeals of delight were out of the way, Renée began to watch. And as she'd watched, her wide blue eyes had become first confused and then concerned.

This morning we'd gone for a walk along the beach. She wanted to show off all the beauties of her new home, still hoping, I think, that the sun might lure me away from Forks. She'd also wanted to talk with me alone, and that was easily arranged. Edward had fabricated a term paper to give himself an excuse to stay indoors during the day.

In my head, I went through the conversation again… .

Renée and I ambled along the sidewalk, trying to stay in the range of the infrequent palm tree shadows. Though it was early, the heat was smothering. The air was so heavy with moisture that just breathing in and out was giving my lungs a workout.

"Bella?" my mother asked, looking out past the sand to the lightly crashing waves as she spoke.

"What is it, Mom?"

She sighed, not meeting my gaze. "I'm worried… ."

"What's wrong?" I asked, anxious at once. "What can I do?"

"It's not me." She shook her head. "I'm worried about you … and Edward."

Renée finally looked at me when she said his name, her face apologetic.

"Oh," I mumbled, fixing my eyes on a pair of joggers as they passed us, drenched with sweat.

"You two are more serious than I'd been thinking," she went on.

I frowned, quickly reviewing the last two days in my head. Edward and I had barely touched — in front of her, at least. I wondered if Renée was about to give me a lecture on responsibility, too. I didn't mind that the way I had with Charlie. It wasn't embarrassing with my mom. After all, I'd been the one giving her that lecture time and time again in the last ten years.

"There's something … strange about the way you two are together," she murmured, her forehead creasing over her troubled eyes. "The way he watches you — it's so … protective. Like he's about to throw himself in front of a bullet to save you or something."

I laughed, though I was still not able to meet her gaze. "That's a bad thing?"

"No." She frowned as she struggled for the words. "It's just different. He's very intense about you … and very careful. I feel like I don't really understand your relationship. Like there's some secret I'm missing… ."

"I think you're imagining things, Mom," I said quickly, struggling to keep my voice light. There was a flutter in my stomach. I'd forgotten how much my mother saw. Something about her simple view of the world cut through all the distractions and pierced right to the truth of things. This had never been a problem before. Until now, there had never been a secret I couldn't tell her.

"It's not just him." She set her lips defensively. "I wish you could see how you move around him."

"What do you mean?"

"The way you move — you orient yourself around him without even thinking about it. When he moves, even a little bit, you adjust your position at the same time. Like magnets ... or gravity. You're like a ... satellite, or something. I've never seen anything like it."

She pursed her lips and stared down.

"Don't tell me," I teased, forcing a smile. "You're reading mysteries again, aren't you? Or is it sci-fi this time?"

Renée flushed a delicate pink. "That's beside the point."

"Found anything good?"

"Well, there was one — but that doesn't matter. We're talking about you right now."

"You should stick to romance, Mom. You know how you freak yourself out."

Her lips turned up at the corners. "I'm being silly, aren't I?"

For half a second I couldn't answer. Renée was so easily swayed. Sometimes it was a good thing, because not all of her ideas were practical. But it pained me to see how quickly she caved in to my trivializing, especially since she was dead right this time.

She looked up, and I controlled my expression.

"Not silly — just being a mom."

She laughed and then gestured grandly toward the white sands stretching to the blue water.

“And all this isn’t enough to get you to move back in with your silly mom?”

I wiped my hand dramatically across my forehead, and then pretended to wring my hair out.

“You get used to the humidity,” she promised.

“You can get used to rain, too,” I countered.

She elbowed me playfully and then took my hand as we walked back to her car.

Other than her worries about me, she seemed happy enough. Content. She still looked at Phil with goo-goo eyes, and that was comforting. Surely her life was full and satisfying. Surely she didn’t miss me that much, even now… .

Edward’s icy fingers brushed my cheek. I looked up, blinking, coming back to the present. He leaned down and kissed my forehead.

“We’re home, Sleeping Beauty. Time to awake.”

We were stopped in front of Charlie’s house. The porch light was on and the cruiser was parked in the driveway. As I examined the house, I saw the curtain twitch in the living room window, flashing a line of yellow light across the dark lawn.

I sighed. Of course Charlie was waiting to pounce.

Edward must have been thinking the same thing, because his expression was stiff and his eyes remote as he came to get my door for me.

"How bad?" I asked.

"Charlie's not going to be difficult," Edward promised, his voice level with no hint of humor. "He missed you."

My eyes narrowed in doubt. If that was the case, then why was Edward tensed as if for a battle?

My bag was small, but he insisted on carrying it into the house. Charlie held the door open for us.

"Welcome home, kid!" Charlie shouted like he really meant it. "How was Jacksonville?"

"Moist. And buggy."

"So Renée didn't sell you on the University of Florida?"

"She tried. But I'd rather drink water than inhale it."

Charlie's eyes flickered unwillingly to Edward. "Did you have a nice time?"

"Yes," Edward answered in a serene voice. "Renée was very hospitable."

"That's ... um, good. Glad you had fun." Charlie turned away from Edward and pulled me in for an unexpected hug.

"Impressive," I whispered in his ear.

He rumbled a laugh. "I really missed you, Bells. The food around here sucks when you're gone."

"I'll get on it," I said as he let me go.

"Would you call Jacob first? He's been bugging me every five minutes since six o'clock this morning. I promised I'd have you call him before you even unpacked."

I didn't have to look at Edward to feel that he was too still, too cold beside me. So this was the cause of his tension.

"Jacob wants to talk to me?"

"Pretty bad, I'd say. He wouldn't tell me what it was about — just said it was important."

The phone rang then, shrill and demanding.

"That's him again, I'd bet my next paycheck," Charlie muttered.

"I got it." I hurried to the kitchen.

Edward followed after me while Charlie disappeared into the living room.

I grabbed the phone mid-ring, and twisted around so that I was facing the wall. "Hello?"

"You're back," Jacob said.

His familiar husky voice sent a wave of wistfulness through me. A thousand memories spun in my head, tangling together — a rocky beach strewn with driftwood trees, a garage made of plastic sheds, warm sodas in a paper bag, a tiny room with one too-small shabby loveseat. The laughter in his deep-set black eyes, the feverish heat of his big hand around mine, the flash of his white teeth against his dark skin, his face stretching into the wide smile that had always

been like a key to a secret door where only kindred spirits could enter.

It felt sort of like homesickness, this longing for the place and person who had sheltered me through my darkest night.

I cleared the lump from my throat. “Yes,” I answered.

“Why didn’t you call me?” Jacob demanded.

His angry tone instantly got my back up. “Because I’ve been in the house for exactly four seconds and your call interrupted Charlie telling me that you’d called.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Sure. Now, why are you harassing Charlie?”

“I need to talk to you.”

“Yeah, I figured out that part all by myself. Go ahead.”

There was a short pause.

“You going to school tomorrow?”

I frowned to myself, unable to make sense of this question. “Of course I am. Why wouldn’t I?”

“I dunno. Just curious.”

Another pause.

“So what did you want to talk about, Jake?”

He hesitated. “Nothing really, I guess. I … wanted to hear your voice.”

"Yeah, I know. I'm so glad you called me, Jake. I ..." But I didn't know what more to say. I wanted to tell him I was on my way to La Push right now. And I couldn't tell him that.

"I have to go," he said abruptly.

"What?"

"I'll talk to you soon, okay?"

"But Jake —"

He was already gone. I listened to the dial tone with disbelief.

"That was short," I muttered.

"Is everything all right?" Edward asked. His voice was low and careful.

I turned slowly to face him. His expression was perfectly smooth — impossible to read.

"I don't know. I wonder what that was about." It didn't make sense that Jacob had been hounding Charlie all day just to ask me if I was going to school. And if he'd wanted to hear my voice, then why did he hang up so quickly?

"Your guess is probably better than mine," Edward said, the hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"Mmm," I murmured. That was true. I knew Jake inside and out. It shouldn't be that complicated to figure out his motivations.

With my thoughts miles away — about fifteen miles away, up the road to La Push — I started combing through the fridge, assembling ingredients for Charlie's dinner. Edward leaned against the counter, and I was distantly aware that his eyes were on my face, but too preoccupied to worry about what he saw there.

The school thing seemed like the key to me. That was the only real question Jake had asked. And he had to be after an answer to something, or he wouldn't have been bugging Charlie so persistently.

Why would my attendance record matter to him, though?

I tried to think about it in a logical way. So, if I hadn't been going to school tomorrow, what would be the problem with that, from Jacob's perspective? Charlie had given me a little grief about missing a day of school so close to finals, but I'd convinced him that one Friday wasn't going to derail my studies. Jake would hardly care about that.

My brain refused to come up with any brilliant insights. Maybe I was missing some vital piece of information.

What could have changed in the past three days that was so important that Jacob would break his long streak of refusing to answer my phone calls and contact me? What difference could three days make?

I froze in the middle of the kitchen. The package of icy hamburger in my hands slipped through my numb fingers. It took me a slow second to miss the thud it should have made against the floor.

Edward had caught it and thrown it onto the counter. His arms were already around me, his lips at my ear.

“What’s wrong?”

I shook my head, dazed.

Three days could change everything.

Hadn’t I just been thinking about how impossible college was? How I couldn’t be anywhere near people after I’d gone through the painful three-day conversion that would set me free from mortality, so that I could spend eternity with Edward? The conversion that would make me forever a prisoner to my own thirst… .

Had Charlie told Billy that I’d vanished for three days? Had Billy jumped to conclusions? Had Jacob really been asking me if I was still human? Making sure that the werewolves’ treaty was unbroken — that none of the Cullens had dared to bite a human … bite, not kill … ?

But did he honestly think I would come home to Charlie if that was the case?

Edward shook me. “Bella?” he asked, truly anxious now.

“I think … I think he was checking,” I mumbled. “Checking to make sure. That I’m human, I mean.”

Edward stiffened, and a low hiss sounded in my ear.

“We’ll have to leave,” I whispered. “Before. So that it doesn’t break the treaty. We won’t ever be able to come back.”

His arms tightened around me. “I know.”

“Ahem.” Charlie cleared his voice loudly behind us.

I jumped, and then pulled free of Edward’s arms, my face getting hot. Edward leaned back against the counter. His eyes were tight. I could see worry in them, and anger.

“If you don’t want to make dinner, I can call for a pizza,” Charlie hinted.

“No, that’s okay, I’m already started.”

“Okay,” Charlie said. He propped himself against the doorframe, folding his arms.

I sighed and got to work, trying to ignore my audience.

“If I asked you to do something, would you trust me?” Edward asked, an edge to his soft voice.

We were almost to school. Edward had been relaxed and joking just a moment ago, and now suddenly his hands were clenched tight on the steering wheel, his knuckles straining in an effort not to snap it into pieces.

I stared at his anxious expression — his eyes were far away, like he was listening to distant voices.

My pulse sped in response to his stress, but I answered carefully. “That depends.”

We pulled into the school lot.

“I was afraid you would say that.”

"What do you want me to do, Edward?"

"I want you to stay in the car." He pulled into his usual spot and turned the engine off as he spoke. "I want you to wait here until I come back for you."

"But … why?"

That was when I saw him. He would have been hard to miss, towering over the students the way he did, even if he hadn't been leaning against his black motorcycle, parked illegally on the sidewalk.

"Oh."

Jacob's face was a calm mask that I recognized well. It was the face he used when he was determined to keep his emotions in check, to keep himself under control. It made him look like Sam, the oldest of the wolves, the leader of the Quileute pack. But Jacob could never quite manage the perfect serenity Sam always exuded.

I'd forgotten how much this face bothered me. Though I'd gotten to know Sam pretty well before the Cullens had come back — to like him, even — I'd never been able to completely shake the resentment I felt when Jacob mimicked Sam's expression. It was a stranger's face. He wasn't my Jacob when he wore it.

"You jumped to the wrong conclusion last night," Edward murmured. "He asked about school because he knew that I would be where you were. He was looking for a safe place to talk to me. A place with witnesses."

So I'd misinterpreted Jacob's motives last night. Missing information, that was the problem.

Information like why in the world Jacob would want to talk to Edward.

“I’m not staying in the car,” I said.

Edward groaned quietly. “Of course not. Well, let’s get this over with.”

Jacob’s face hardened as we walked toward him, hand in hand.

I noticed other faces, too — the faces of my classmates. I noticed how their eyes widened as they took in all six foot seven inches of Jacob’s long body, muscled up the way no normal sixteen-and-a-half-year-old ever had been. I saw those eyes rake over his tight black t-shirt — short-sleeved, though the day was unseasonably cool — his ragged, grease-smeared jeans, and the glossy black bike he leaned against. Their eyes didn’t linger on his face — something about his expression had them glancing quickly away. And I noticed the wide berth everyone gave him, the bubble of space that no one dared to encroach on.

With a sense of astonishment, I realized that Jacob looked dangerous to them. How odd.

Edward stopped a few yards away from Jacob, and I could tell that he was uncomfortable having me so close to a werewolf. He drew his hand back slightly, pulling me halfway behind his body.

“You could have called us,” Edward said in a steel-hard voice.

“Sorry,” Jacob answered, his face twisting into a sneer. “I don’t have any leeches on my speed dial.”

"You could have reached me at Bella's house, of course."

Jacob's jaw flexed, and his brows pulled together. He didn't answer.

"This is hardly the place, Jacob. Could we discuss this later?"

"Sure, sure. I'll stop by your crypt after school." Jacob snorted. "What's wrong with now?"

Edward looked around pointedly, his eyes resting on the witnesses who were just barely out of hearing range. A few people were hesitating on the sidewalk, their eyes bright with expectation. Like they were hoping a fight might break out to alleviate the tedium of another Monday morning. I saw Tyler Crowley nudge Austin Marks, and they both paused on their way to class.

"I already know what you came to say," Edward reminded Jacob in voice so low that I could barely make it out. "Message delivered. Consider us warned."

Edward glanced down at me for a fleeting second with worried eyes.

"Warned?" I asked blankly. "What are you talking about?"

"You didn't tell her?" Jacob asked, his eyes widening with disbelief. "What, were you afraid she'd take our side?"

"Please drop it, Jacob," Edward said in an even voice.

"Why?" Jacob challenged.

I frowned in confusion. "What don't I know? Edward?"

Edward just glared at Jacob as if he hadn't heard me.

"Jake?"

Jacob raised his eyebrow at me. "He didn't tell you that his big … brother crossed the line Saturday night?" he asked, his tone thickly layered with sarcasm. Then his eyes flickered back to Edward. "Paul was totally justified in —"

"It was no-man's land!" Edward hissed.

"Was not!"

Jacob was fuming visibly. His hands trembled. He shook his head and sucked in two deep lungfuls of air.

"Emmett and Paul?" I whispered. Paul was Jacob's most volatile pack brother. He was the one who'd lost control that day in the woods — the memory of the snarling gray wolf was suddenly vivid in my head. "What happened? Were they fighting?" My voice strained higher in panic. "Why? Did Paul get hurt?"

"No one fought," Edward said quietly, only to me. "No one got hurt. Don't be anxious."

Jacob was staring at us with incredulous eyes. "You didn't tell her anything at all, did you? Is that why you took her away? So she wouldn't know that —?"

"Leave now." Edward cut him off mid-sentence, and his face was abruptly frightening — truly frightening. For a second, he looked like … like a vampire. He glared at Jacob with vicious, unveiled loathing.

Jacob raised his eyebrows, but made no other move. “Why haven’t you told her?”

They faced each other in silence for a long moment. More students gathered behind Tyler and Austin. I saw Mike next to Ben — Mike had one hand on Ben’s shoulder, like he was holding him in place.

In the dead silence, all the details suddenly fell into place for me with a burst of intuition.

Something Edward didn’t want me to know.

Something that Jacob wouldn’t have kept from me.

Something that had the Cullens and the wolves both in the woods, moving in hazardous proximity to each other.

Something that would cause Edward to insist that I fly across the country.

Something that Alice had seen in a vision last week — a vision Edward had lied to me about.

Something I’d been waiting for anyway. Something I knew would happen again, as much as I might wish it never would. It was never going to end, was it?

I heard the quick gasp, gasp, gasp, gasp of the air dragging through my lips, but I couldn’t stop it. It looked like the school was shaking, like there was an earthquake, but I knew it was my own trembling that caused the illusion.

“She came back for me,” I choked out.

Victoria was never going to give up till I was dead. She would keep repeating the same pattern — feint and

run, feint and run — until she found a hole through my defenders.

Maybe I'd get lucky. Maybe the Volturi would come for me first — they'd kill me quicker, at least.

Edward held me tight to his side, angling his body so that he was still between me and Jacob, and stroked my face with anxious hands. "It's fine," he whispered to me. "It's fine. I'll never let her get close to you, it's fine."

Then he glared at Jacob. "Does that answer your question, mongrel?"

"You don't think Bella has a right to know?" Jacob challenged. "It's her life."

Edward kept his voice muted; even Tyler, edging forward by inches, would be unable to hear. "Why should she be frightened when she was never in danger?"

"Better frightened than lied to."

I tried to pull myself together, but my eyes were swimming in moisture. I could see it behind my lids — I could see Victoria's face, her lips pulled back over her teeth, her crimson eyes glowing with the obsession of her vendetta; she held Edward responsible for the demise of her love, James. She wouldn't stop until his love was taken from him, too.

Edward wiped the tears from my cheek with his fingertips.

"Do you really think hurting her is better than protecting her?" he murmured.

“She’s tougher than you think,” Jacob said. “And she’s been through worse.”

Abruptly, Jacob’s expression shifted, and he was staring at Edward with an odd, speculative expression. His eyes narrowed like he was trying to do a difficult math problem in his head.

I felt Edward cringe. I glanced up at him, and his face was contorted in what could only be pain. For one ghastly moment, I was reminded of our afternoon in Italy, in the macabre tower room of the Volturi, where Jane had tortured Edward with her malignant gift, burning him with her thoughts alone… .

The memory snapped me out of my near hysteria and put everything in perspective. Because I’d rather Victoria killed me a hundred times over than watch Edward suffer that way again.

“That’s funny,” Jacob said, laughing as he watched Edward’s face.

Edward winced, but smoothed his expression with a little effort. He couldn’t quite hide the agony in his eyes.

I glanced, wide-eyed, from Edward’s grimace to Jacob’s sneer.

“What are you doing to him?” I demanded.

“It’s nothing, Bella,” Edward told me quietly. “Jacob just has a good memory, that’s all.”

Jacob grinned, and Edward winced again.

“Stop it! Whatever you’re doing.”

“Sure, if you want.” Jacob shrugged. “It’s his own fault if he doesn’t like the things I remember, though.”

I glared at him, and he smiled back impishly — like a kid caught doing something he knows he shouldn’t by someone who he knows won’t punish him.

“The principal’s on his way to discourage loitering on school property,” Edward murmured to me. “Let’s get to English, Bella, so you’re not involved.”

“Overprotective, isn’t he?” Jacob said, talking just to me. “A little trouble makes life fun. Let me guess, you’re not allowed to have fun, are you?”

Edward glowered, and his lips pulled back from his teeth ever so slightly.

“Shut up, Jake,” I said.

Jacob laughed. “That sounds like a no. Hey, if you ever feel like having a life again, you could come see me. I’ve still got your motorcycle in my garage.”

This news distracted me. “You were supposed to sell that. You promised Charlie you would.” If I hadn’t begged on Jake’s behalf — after all, he’d put weeks of labor into both motorcycles, and he deserved some kind of payback — Charlie would have thrown my bike in a Dumpster. And possibly set that Dumpster on fire.

“Yeah, right. Like I would do that. It belongs to you, not me. Anyway, I’ll hold on to it until you want it back.”

A tiny hint of the smile I remembered was suddenly playing around the edges of his lips.

"Jake ..."

He leaned forward, his face earnest now, the bitter sarcasm fading. "I think I might have been wrong before, you know, about not being able to be friends. Maybe we could manage it, on my side of the line. Come see me."

I was vividly conscious of Edward, his arms still wrapped protectively around me, motionless as a stone. I shot a look at his face — it was calm, patient.

"I, er, don't know about that, Jake."

Jacob dropped the antagonistic façade completely. It was like he'd forgotten Edward was there, or at least he was determined to act that way. "I miss you every day, Bella. It's not the same without you."

"I know and I'm sorry, Jake, I just ..."

He shook his head, and sighed. "I know. Doesn't matter, right? I guess I'll survive or something. Who needs friends?" He grimaced, trying to cover the pain with a thin attempt at bravado.

Jacob's suffering had always triggered my protective side. It was not entirely rational — Jacob was hardly in need of any physical protection I could offer. But my arms, pinned beneath Edward's, yearned to reach out to him. To wrap around his big, warm waist in a silent promise of acceptance and comfort.

Edward's shielding arms had become restraints.

"Okay, get to class," a stern voice sounded behind us. "Move along, Mr. Crowley."

“Get to school, Jake,” I whispered, anxious as soon as I recognized the principal’s voice. Jacob went to the Quileute school, but he might still get in trouble for trespassing or the equivalent.

Edward released me, taking just my hand and pulling me behind his body again.

Mr. Greene pushed through the circle of spectators, his brows pressing down like ominous storm clouds over his small eyes.

“I mean it,” he was threatening. “Detention for anyone who’s still standing here when I turn around again.”

The audience melted away before he was finished with his sentence.

“Ah, Mr. Cullen. Do we have a problem here?”

“Not at all, Mr. Greene. We were just on our way to class.”

“Excellent. I don’t seem to recognize your friend.” Mr. Greene turned his glower on Jacob. “Are you a new student here?”

Mr. Greene’s eyes scrutinized Jacob, and I could see that he’d come to the same conclusion everyone else had: dangerous. A troublemaker.

“Nope,” Jacob answered, half a smirk on his broad lips.

“Then I suggest you remove yourself from school property at once, young man, before I call the police.”

Jacob’s little smirk became a full-blown grin, and I knew he was picturing Charlie showing up to arrest

him. This grin was too bitter, too full of mocking to satisfy me. This wasn't the smile I'd been waiting to see.

Jacob said, "Yes, sir," and snapped a military salute before he climbed on his bike and kicked it to a start right there on the sidewalk. The engine snarled and then the tires squealed as he spun it sharply around. In a matter of seconds, Jacob raced out of sight.

Mr. Greene gnashed his teeth together while he watched the performance.

"Mr. Cullen, I expect you to ask your friend to refrain from trespassing again."

"He's no friend of mine, Mr. Greene, but I'll pass along the warning."

Mr. Greene pursed his lips. Edward's perfect grades and spotless record were clearly a factor in Mr. Greene's assessment of the incident. "I see. If you're worried about any trouble, I'd be happy to —"

"There's nothing to worry about, Mr. Greene. There won't be any trouble."

"I hope that's correct. Well, then. On to class. You, too, Miss Swan."

Edward nodded, and pulled me quickly along toward the English building.

"Do you feel well enough to go to class?" he whispered when we were past the principal.

"Yes," I whispered back, not quite sure if this was a lie.

Whether I felt well or not was hardly the most important consideration. I needed to talk to Edward right away, and English class wasn't the ideal place for the conversation I had in mind.

But with Mr. Greene right behind us, there weren't a lot of other options.

We got to class a little late and took our seats quickly. Mr. Berty was reciting a Frost poem. He ignored our entrance, refusing to let us break his rhythm.

I yanked a blank page out of my notebook and started writing, my handwriting more illegible than normal thanks to my agitation.

*What happened? Tell me everything. And screw the protecting me crap, please.*

I shoved the note at Edward. He sighed, and then began writing. It took him less time than me, though he wrote an entire paragraph in his own personal calligraphy before he slipped the paper back.

*Alice saw that Victoria was coming back. I took you out of town merely as a precaution - there was never a chance that she would have gotten anywhere close to you. Emmett and Jasper very nearly had her, but Victoria seems to have some instinct for evasion. She escaped right down the Quileute boundary line as if she were reading it from a map. It didn't help that Alice's abilities were nullified by the Quileutes' involvement. To be fair, the Quileutes might have had her, too, if we hadn't gotten in the way. The big gray one thought Emmett was over the line, and he got defensive. Of course Rosalie reacted to that, and everyone left the chase to protect their companions. Carlisle and Jasper got things calmed down before it got out of hand. But by then, Victoria had slipped away. That's everything.*

I frowned at the letters on the page. All of them had been in on it — Emmett, Jasper, Alice, Rosalie, and Carlisle. Maybe even Esme, though he hadn't mentioned her. And then Paul and the rest of the Quileute pack. It might so easily have turned into a fight, pitting my future family and my old friends against each other. Any one of them could have been hurt. I imagined the wolves would be in the most danger, but picturing tiny Alice next to one of the huge werewolves, fighting ...

I shuddered.

Carefully, I scrubbed out the entire paragraph with my eraser and then I wrote over the top:

*What about Charlie? She could have been after him.*

Edward was shaking his head before I finished, obviously going to downplay any danger on Charlie's behalf. He held a hand out, but I ignored that and started again.

*You can't know that she wasn't thinking that, because you weren't here. Florida was a bad idea.*

He took the paper from underneath my hand.

*I wasn't about to send you off alone. With your luck, not even the black box would survive.*

That wasn't what I'd meant at all; I hadn't thought of going without him. I'd meant that we should have stayed here together. But I was sidetracked by his response, and a little miffed. Like I couldn't fly cross country without bringing the plane down. Very funny.

*So let's say my bad luck did crash the plane. What exactly were you going to do about it?*

*Why is the plane crashing?*

He was trying to hide a smile now.

*The pilots are passed out drunk.*

*Easy. I'd fly the plane*

Of course. I pursed my lips and tried again.

*Both engines have exploded and we're falling in a death spiral toward the earth.*

*I'd wait till we were close enough to the ground, get a good grip on you, kick out the wall, and jump. Then I'd run you back to the scene of the accident, and we'd stumble around like the two luckiest survivors in history.*

I stared at him wordlessly.

"What?" he whispered.

I shook my head in awe. "Nothing," I mouthed.

I scrubbed out the disconcerting conversation and wrote one more line.

*You will tell me next time.*

I knew there would be a next time. The pattern would continue until someone lost.

Edward stared into my eyes for a long moment. I wondered what my face looked like — it felt cold, so the blood hadn't returned to my cheeks. My eyelashes were still wet.

He sighed and then nodded once.

*Thanks.*

The paper disappeared from under my hand. I looked up, blinking in surprise, just as Mr. Berty came down the aisle.

“Is that something you’d like to share there, Mr. Cullen?”

Edward looked up innocently and held out the sheet of paper on top of his folder. “My notes?” he asked, sounding confused.

Mr. Berty scanned the notes — no doubt a perfect transcription of his lecture — and then walked away frowning.

It was later, in Calculus — my one class without Edward — that I heard the gossip.

“My money’s on the big Indian,” someone was saying.

I peeked up to see that Tyler, Mike, Austin, and Ben had their heads bent together, deep in conversation.

“Yeah,” Mike whispered. “Did you see the size of that Jacob kid? I think he could take Cullen down.” Mike sounded pleased by the idea.

“I don’t think so,” Ben disagreed. “There’s something about Edward. He’s always so … confident. I have a feeling he can take care of himself.”

“I’m with Ben,” Tyler agreed. “Besides, if that other kid messed Edward up, you know those big brothers of his would get involved.”

“Have you been down to La Push lately?” Mike asked. “Lauren and I went to the beach a couple of weeks ago, and believe me, Jacob’s friends are all just as big as he is.”

“Huh,” Tyler said. “Too bad it didn’t turn into anything. Guess we’ll never know how it would have turned out.”

“It didn’t look over to me,” Austin said. “Maybe we’ll get to see.”

Mike grinned. “Anyone in the mood for a bet?”

“Ten on Jacob,” Austin said at once.

“Ten on Cullen,” Tyler chimed in.

“Ten on Edward,” Ben agreed.

“Jacob,” Mike said.

“Hey, do you guys know what it was about?” Austin wondered. “That might affect the odds.”

“I can guess,” Mike said, and then he shot a glance at me at the same time that Ben and Tyler did.

From their expressions, none of them had realized I was in easy hearing distance. They all looked away quickly, shuffling the papers on their desks.

“I still say Jacob,” Mike muttered under his breath.

# Chapter 4

## NATURE

I was having a bad week.

I knew that essentially nothing had changed. Okay, so Victoria had not given up, but had I ever dreamed for one moment that she had? Her reappearance had only confirmed what I'd already known. No reason for fresh panic.

In theory. Not panicking was easier said than done.

Graduation was only a few weeks away, but I wondered if it wasn't a little foolish to sit around, weak and tasty, waiting for the next disaster. It seemed too dangerous to be human — just begging for trouble. Someone like me shouldn't be human. Someone with my luck ought to be a little less helpless.

But no one would listen to me.

Carlisle had said, "There are seven of us, Bella. And with Alice on our side, I don't think Victoria's going to catch us off guard. I think it's important, for Charlie's sake, that we stick with the original plan."

Esme had said, "We'd never allow anything to happen to you, sweetheart. You know that. Please don't be anxious." And then she'd kissed my forehead.

Emmett had said, "I'm really glad Edward didn't kill you. Everything's so much more fun with you around."

Rosalie had glared at him.

Alice had rolled her eyes and said, "I'm offended. You're not honestly worried about this, are you?"

"If it's no big deal, then why did Edward drag me to Florida?" I'd demanded.

"Haven't you noticed yet, Bella, that Edward is just the teeniest bit prone to overreaction?"

Jasper had silently erased all the panic and tension in my body with his curious talent of controlling emotional atmospheres. I'd felt reassured, and let them talk me out of my desperate pleading.

Of course, that calm had worn off as soon as Edward and I had walked out of the room.

So the consensus was that I was just supposed to forget that a deranged vampire was stalking me, intent on my death. Go about my business.

I did try. And surprisingly, there were other things almost as stressful to dwell on besides my status on the endangered species list… .

Because Edward's response had been the most frustrating of them all.

"That's between you and Carlisle," he'd said. "Of course, you know that I'm willing to make it between you and me at any time that you wish. You know my condition." And he had smiled angelically.

Ugh. I did know his condition. Edward had promised that he would change me himself whenever I wanted … just as long as I was married to him first.

Sometimes I wondered if he was only pretending that he couldn't read my mind. How else had he struck

upon the one condition that I would have trouble accepting? The one condition that would slow me down.

All in all, a very bad week. And today was the worst day in it.

It was always a bad day when Edward was away. Alice had foreseen nothing out of the ordinary this weekend, and so I'd insisted that he take the opportunity to go hunting with his brothers. I knew how it bored him to hunt the easy, nearby prey.

"Go have fun," I'd told him. "Bag a few mountain lions for me."

I would never admit to him how hard it was for me when he was gone — how it brought back the abandonment nightmares. If he knew that, it would make him feel horrible and he would be afraid to ever leave me, even for the most necessary reasons. It had been like that in the beginning, when he'd first returned from Italy. His golden eyes had turned black and he'd suffered from his thirst more than it was already necessary that he suffer. So I put on a brave face and all but kicked him out the door whenever Emmett and Jasper wanted to go.

I think he saw through me, though. A little. This morning there had been a note left on my pillow:

*I'll be back so soon you won't have time to miss me. Look after my heart - I've left it with you.*

So now I had a big empty Saturday with nothing but my morning shift at Newton's Olympic Outfitters to

distract me. And, of course, the oh-so-comforting promise from Alice.

"I'm staying close to home to hunt. I'll only be fifteen minutes away if you need me. I'll keep an eye out for trouble."

Translation: don't try anything funny just because Edward is gone.

Alice was certainly just as capable of crippling my truck as Edward was.

I tried to look on the bright side. After work, I had plans to help Angela with her announcements, so that would be a distraction. And Charlie was in an excellent mood due to Edward's absence, so I might as well enjoy that while it lasted. Alice would spend the night with me if I was pathetic enough to ask her to. And then tomorrow, Edward would be home. I would survive.

Not wanting to be ridiculously early for work, I ate my breakfast slowly, one Cheerio at a time. Then, when I'd washed the dishes, I arranged the magnets on the fridge into a perfect line. Maybe I was developing obsessive-compulsive disorder.

The last two magnets — round black utilitarian pieces that were my favorites because they could hold ten sheets of paper to the fridge without breaking a sweat — did not want to cooperate with my fixation. Their polarities were reversed; every time I tried to line the last one up, the other jumped out of place.

For some reason — impending mania, perhaps — this really irritated me. Why couldn't they just play nice? Stupid with stubbornness, I kept shoving them together as if I was expecting them to suddenly give

up. I could have flipped one over, but that felt like losing. Finally, exasperated at myself more than the magnets, I pulled them from the fridge and held them together with two hands. It took a little effort — they were strong enough to put up a fight — but I forced them to coexist side-by-side.

“See,” I said out loud — talking to inanimate objects, never a good sign — “That’s not so horrible, is it?”

I stood there like an idiot for a second, not quite able to admit that I wasn’t having any lasting effect against scientific principles. Then, with a sigh, I put the magnets back on the fridge, a foot apart.

“There’s no need to be so inflexible,” I muttered.

It was still too early, but I decided I’d better get out of the house before the inanimate objects started talking back.

When I got to Newton’s, Mike was methodically dry mopping the aisles while his mom arranged a new counter display. I caught them in the middle of an argument, unaware that I had arrived.

“But it’s the only time that Tyler can go,” Mike complained. “You said after graduation —”

“You’re just going to have to wait,” Mrs. Newton snapped. “You and Tyler can think of something else to do. You are not going to Seattle until the police stop whatever it is that is going on there. I know Beth Crowley has told Tyler the same thing, so don’t act like I’m the bad guy — oh, good morning, Bella,” she said when she caught sight of me, brightening her tone quickly. “You’re early.”

Karen Newton was the last person I'd think to ask for help in an outdoor sports equipment store. Her perfectly highlighted blond hair was always smoothed into an elegant twist on the back of her neck, her fingernails were polished by professionals, as were her toenails — visible through the strappy high heels that didn't resemble anything Newton's offered on the long row of hiking boots.

"Light traffic," I joked as I grabbed my hideous fluorescent orange vest out from under the counter. I was surprised that Mrs. Newton was as worked up about this Seattle thing as Charlie. I'd thought he was going to extremes.

"Well, er ..." Mrs. Newton hesitated for a moment, playing uncomfortably with a stack of flyers she was arranging by the register.

I stopped with one arm in my vest. I knew that look.

When I'd let the Newtons know that I wouldn't be working here this summer — abandoning them in their busiest season, in effect — they'd started training Katie Marshall to take my place. They couldn't really afford both of us on the payroll at the same time, so when it looked like a slow day ...

"I was going to call," Mrs. Newton continued. "I don't think we're expecting a ton of business today. Mike and I can probably handle things. I'm sorry you got up and drove out... ."

On a normal day, I would be ecstatic with this turn of events. Today ... not so much.

"Okay," I sighed. My shoulders slumped. What was I going to do now?

“That’s not fair, Mom,” Mike said. “If Bella wants to work —”

“No, it’s okay, Mrs. Newton. Really, Mike. I’ve got finals to study for and stuff… .” I didn’t want to be a source of familial discord when they were already arguing.

“Thanks, Bella. Mike, you missed aisle four. Um, Bella, do you mind throwing these flyers in a Dumpster on the way out? I told the girl who left them here that I’d put them on the counter, but I really don’t have the room.”

“Sure, no problem.” I put my vest away, and then tucked the flyers under my arm and headed out into the misty rain.

The Dumpster was around the side of Newton’s, next to where we employees were supposed to park. I shuffled along, kicking pebbles petulantly on my way. I was about to fling the stack of bright yellow papers into the trash when the heading printed in bold across the top caught my eye. One word in particular seized my attention.

I clutched the papers in both hands as I stared at the picture beneath the caption. A lump rose in my throat.

SAVE THE OLYMPIC WOLF

Under the words, there was a detailed drawing of a wolf in front of a fir tree, its head thrown back in the act of baying at the moon. It was a disconcerting picture; something about the wolf’s plaintive posture made him look forlorn. Like he was howling in grief.

And then I was running to my truck, the flyers still locked in my grip.

Fifteen minutes — that's all I had. But it should be long enough. It was only fifteen minutes to La Push, and surely I would cross the boundary line a few minutes before I hit the town.

My truck roared to life without any difficulty.

Alice couldn't have seen me doing this, because I hadn't been planning it. A snap decision, that was the key! And as long as I moved fast enough, I should be able to capitalize on it.

I'd thrown the damp flyers in my haste and they were scattered in a bright mess across the passenger seat — a hundred bolded captions, a hundred dark howling wolves outlined against the yellow background.

I barreled down the wet highway, turning the windshield wipers on high and ignoring the groan of the ancient engine. Fifty-five was the most I could coax out of my truck, and I prayed it would be enough.

I had no clue where the boundary line was, but I began to feel safer as I passed the first houses outside La Push. This must be beyond where Alice was allowed to follow.

I'd call her when I got to Angela's this afternoon, I reasoned, so that she'd know I was fine. There was no reason for her to get worked up. She didn't need to be mad at me — Edward would be angry enough for two when he got back.

My truck was positively wheezing by the time it grated to a stop in front of the familiar faded red house. The lump came back to my throat as I stared at the little place that had once been my refuge. It had been so long since I'd been here.

Before I could cut the engine, Jacob was standing in the door, his face blank with shock.

In the sudden silence when the truck-roar died, I heard him gasp.

"Bella?"

"Hey, Jake!"

"Bella!" he yelled back, and the smile I'd been waiting for stretched across his face like the sun breaking free of the clouds. His teeth gleamed bright against his russet skin. "I can't believe it!"

He ran to the truck and half-yanked me through the open door, and then we were both jumping up and down like kids.

"How did you get here?"

"I snuck out!"

"Awesome!"

"Hey, Bella!" Billy had rolled himself into the doorway to see what all the commotion was about.

"Hey, Bil —!"

Just then my air choked off — Jacob grabbed me up in a bear hug too tight to breathe and swung me around in a circle.

“Wow, it’s good to see you here!”

“Can’t … breathe,” I gasped.

He laughed and put me down.

“Welcome back, Bella,” he said, grinning. And the way he said the words made it sound like welcome home.

We started walking, too keyed up to sit still in the house. Jacob was practically bouncing as he moved, and I had to remind him a few times that my legs weren’t ten feet long.

As we walked, I felt myself settling into another version of myself, the self I had been with Jacob. A little younger, a little less responsible. Someone who might, on occasion, do something really stupid for no good reason.

Our exuberance lasted through the first few topics of conversation: how we were doing, what we were up to, how long I had, and what had brought me here. When I hesitantly told him about the wolf flyer, his bellowing laugh echoed back from the trees.

But then, as we ambled past the back of the store and shoved through the thick scrub that ringed the far edge of First Beach, we got to the hard parts. All too soon we had to talk about the reasons behind our long separation, and I watched as the face of my friend hardened into the bitter mask that was already too familiar.

“So what’s the story, anyway?” Jacob asked me, kicking a piece of driftwood out of his way with too much force. It sailed over the sand and then clattered against the rocks. “I mean, since the last time we … well, before, you know …” He struggled for the words.

He took a deep breath and tried again. "What I'm asking is … everything is just back to the way it was before he left? You forgave him for all of that?"

I took a deep breath. "There was nothing to forgive."

I wanted to skip past this part, the betrayals, the accusations, but I knew that we had to talk it through before we'd be able to move on to anything else.

Jacob's face puckered up like he'd just licked a lemon. "I wish Sam had taken a picture when he found you that night last September. It would be exhibit A."

"Nobody's on trial."

"Maybe somebody should be."

"Not even you would blame him for leaving, if you knew the reason why."

He glared at me for a few seconds. "Okay," he challenged acidly. "Amaze me."

His hostility was wearing on me — chafing against the raw; it hurt to have him angry with me. It reminded me of the bleak afternoon, long ago, when — under orders from Sam — he'd told me we couldn't be friends. I took a second to compose myself.

"Edward left me last fall because he didn't think I should be hanging out with vampires. He thought it would be healthier for me if he left."

Jacob did a double take. He had to scramble for a minute. Whatever he'd been planning to say, it clearly no longer applied. I was glad he didn't know the catalyst behind Edward's decision. I could only

imagine what he'd think if he knew Jasper had tried to kill me.

"He came back, though, didn't he?" Jacob muttered. "Too bad he can't stick to a decision."

"If you remember, I went and got him."

Jacob stared at me for a moment, and then he backed off. His face relaxed, and his voice was calmer when he spoke.

"That's true. So I never did get the story. What happened?"

I hesitated, biting my lip.

"Is it a secret?" His voice took on a taunting edge. "Are you not allowed to tell me?"

"No," I snapped. "It's just a really long story."

Jacob smiled, arrogant, and turned to walk up the beach, expecting me to follow.

It was no fun being with Jacob if he was going to act like this. I trailed behind him automatically, not sure if I shouldn't turn around and leave. I was going to have to face Alice, though, when I got home... . I supposed I wasn't in any rush.

Jacob walked to a huge, familiar piece of driftwood — an entire tree, roots and all, bleached white and beached deep in the sand; it was our tree, in a way.

Jacob sat down on the natural bench, and patted the space next to him.

"I don't mind long stories. Is there any action?"

I rolled my eyes as I sat next to him. “There’s some action,” I allowed.

“It wouldn’t be real horror without action.”

“Horror!” I scoffed. “Can you listen, or will you be interrupting me with rude comments about my friends?”

He pretended to lock his lips and then threw the invisible key over his shoulder. I tried not to smile, and failed.

“I’ll have to start with the stuff you were already there for,” I decided, working to organize the stories in my head before I began.

Jacob raised his hand.

“Go ahead.”

“That’s good,” he said. “I didn’t understand much that was going on at the time.”

“Yeah, well, it gets complicated, so pay attention. You know how Alice sees things?”

I took his scowl — the wolves weren’t thrilled that the legends of vampires possessing supernatural gifts were true — for a yes, and proceeded with the account of my race through Italy to rescue Edward.

I kept it as succinct as possible — leaving out anything that wasn’t essential. I tried to read Jacob’s reactions, but his face was enigmatic as I explained how Alice had seen Edward plan to kill himself when he’d heard that I was dead. Sometimes Jacob seemed so deep in thought, I wasn’t sure if he was listening. He only interrupted one time.

"The fortune-telling bloodsucker can't see us?" he echoed, his face both fierce and gleeful. "Seriously? That's excellent!"

I clenched my teeth together, and we sat in silence, his face expectant as he waited for me to continue. I glared at him until he realized his mistake.

"Oops!" he said. "Sorry." He locked his lips again.

His response was easier to read when I got to the part about the Volturi. His teeth clenched together, goose bumps rose on his arms, and his nostrils flared. I didn't go into specifics, I just told him that Edward had talked us out of trouble, without revealing the promise we'd had to make, or the visit we were anticipating. Jacob didn't need to have my nightmares.

"Now you know the whole story," I concluded. "So it's your turn to talk. What happened while I was with my mom this weekend?" I knew Jacob would give me more details than Edward had. He wasn't afraid of scaring me.

Jacob leaned forward, instantly animated. "So Embry and Quil and I were running patrol on Saturday night, just routine stuff, when out of nowhere — bam!" He threw his arms out, impersonating an explosion. "There it is — a fresh trail, not fifteen minutes old. Sam wanted us to wait for him, but I didn't know you were gone, and I didn't know if your bloodsuckers were keeping an eye on you or not. So we took off after her at full speed, but she'd crossed the treaty line before we caught up. We spread out along the line, hoping she'd cross back over. It was frustrating, let me tell you." He wagged his head and his hair — growing out from the short crop he'd adopted when he'd joined the pack — flopped into his

eyes. “We ended up too far south. The Cullens chased her back to our side just a few miles north of us. Would have been the perfect ambush if we’d known where to wait.”

He shook his head, grimacing now. “That’s when it got dicey. Sam and the others caught up to her before we did, but she was dancing right along the line, and the whole coven was right there on the other side. The big one, what’s-his-name —”

“Emmett.”

“Yeah, him. He made a lunge for her, but that redhead is fast! He flew right behind her and almost rammed into Paul. So, Paul … well, you know Paul.”

“Yeah.”

“Lost his focus. Can’t say that I blame him — the big bloodsucker was right on top of him. He sprang — hey, don’t give me that look. The vampire was on our land.”

I tried to compose my face so that he would go on. My nails were digging into my palms with the stress of the story, even though I knew it had turned out fine.

“Anyway, Paul missed, and the big one got back on his side. But by then the, er, well the, uh, blonde …” Jacob’s expression was a comical mix of disgust and unwilling admiration as he tried to come up with a word to describe Edward’s sister.

“Rosalie.”

“Whatever. She got real territorial, so Sam and I fell back to get Paul’s flanks. Then their leader and the other blond male —”

"Carlisle and Jasper."

He gave me an exasperated look. "You know I don't really care. Anyway, so Carlisle spoke to Sam, trying to calm things down. Then it was weird, because everyone got really calm really fast. It was that other one you told me about, messing with our heads. But even though we knew what he was doing, we couldn't not be calm."

"Yeah, I know how it feels."

"Really annoying, that's how it feels. Only you can't be annoyed until afterwards." He shook his head angrily. "So Sam and the head vamp agreed that Victoria was the priority, and we started after her again. Carlisle gave us the line, so that we could follow the scent properly, but then she hit the cliffs just north of Makah country, right where the line hugs the coast for a few miles. She took off into the water again. The big one and the calm one wanted permission to cross the line to go after her, but of course we said no."

"Good. I mean, you were being stupid, but I'm glad. Emmett's never cautious enough. He could have gotten hurt."

Jacob snorted. "So did your vampire tell you we attacked for no reason and his totally innocent coven —"

"No," I interrupted. "Edward told me the same story, just without quite as many details."

"Huh," Jacob said under his breath, and he bent over to pick up a rock from among the millions of pebbles at our feet. With a casual flick, he sent it flying a good hundred meters out into the bay. "Well, she'll be back, I guess. We'll get another shot at her."

I shuddered; of course she would be back. Would Edward really tell me next time? I wasn't sure. I'd have to keep an eye on Alice, to look for the signs that the pattern was about to repeat… .

Jacob didn't seem to notice my reaction. He was staring across the waves with a thoughtful expression on his face, his broad lips pursed.

"What are you thinking about?" I asked after a long, quiet time.

"I'm thinking about what you told me. About when the fortune-teller saw you cliff jumping and thought you'd committed suicide, and how it all got out of control… . Do you realize that if you had just waited for me like you were supposed to, then the bl — Alice wouldn't have been able to see you jump? Nothing would have changed. We'd probably be in my garage right now, like any other Saturday. There wouldn't be any vampires in Forks, and you and me …" He trailed off, deep in thought.

It was disconcerting the way he said this, like it would be a good thing to have no vampires in Forks. My heart thumped unevenly at the emptiness of the picture he painted.

"Edward would have come back anyway."

"Are you sure about that?" he asked, belligerent again as soon as I spoke Edward's name.

"Being apart … It didn't work out so well for either of us."

He started to say something, something angry from his expression, but he stopped himself, took a breath, and began again.

"Did you know Sam is mad at you?"

"Me?" It took me a second. "Oh. I see. He thinks they would have stayed away if I wasn't here."

"No. That's not it."

"What's his problem then?"

Jacob leaned down to scoop up another rock. He turned it over and over in his fingers; his eyes were riveted on the black stone while he spoke in a low voice.

"When Sam saw … how you were in the beginning, when Billy told them how Charlie worried when you didn't get better, and then when you started jumping off cliffs …"

I made a face. No one was ever going to let me forget that.

Jacob's eyes flashed up to mine. "He thought you were the one person in the world with as much reason to hate the Cullens as he does. Sam feels sort of … betrayed that you would just let them back into your life like they never hurt you."

I didn't believe for a second that Sam was the only one who felt that way. And the acid in my voice now was for both of them.

"You can tell Sam to go right to —"

"Look at that," Jacob interrupted me, pointing to an eagle in the act of plummeting down toward the ocean from an incredible height. It checked itself at the last minute, only its talons breaking the surface of the waves, just for an instant. Then it flapped away, its

wings straining against the load of the huge fish it had snagged.

"You see it everywhere," Jacob said, his voice suddenly distant. "Nature taking its course — hunter and prey, the endless cycle of life and death."

I didn't understand the point of the nature lecture; I guessed that he was just trying to change the subject. But then he looked down at me with dark humor in his eyes.

"And yet, you don't see the fish trying to plant a kiss on the eagle. You never see that." He grinned a mocking grin.

I grinned back tightly, though the acid taste was still in my mouth. "Maybe the fish was trying," I suggested. "It's hard to tell what a fish is thinking. Eagles are good-looking birds, you know."

"Is that what it comes down to?" His voice was abruptly sharper. "Good looks?"

"Don't be stupid, Jacob."

"Is it the money, then?" he persisted.

"That's nice," I muttered, getting up from the tree. "I'm flattered that you think so much of me." I turned my back on him and paced away.

"Aw, don't get mad." He was right behind me; he caught my wrist and spun me around. "I'm serious! I'm trying to understand here, and I'm coming up blank."

His eyebrows pushed together angrily, and his eyes were black in their deep shadow.

"I love him. Not because he's beautiful or because he's rich!" I spat the word at Jacob. "I'd much rather he weren't either one. It would even out the gap between us just a little bit — because he'd still be the most loving and unselfish and brilliant and decent person I've ever met. Of course I love him. How hard is that to understand?"

"It's impossible to understand."

"Please enlighten me, then, Jacob." I let the sarcasm flow thick. "What is a valid reason for someone to love someone else? Since apparently I'm doing it wrong."

"I think the best place to start would be to look within your own species. That usually works."

"Well, that just sucks!" I snapped. "I guess I'm stuck with Mike Newton after all."

Jacob flinched back and bit his lip. I could see that my words had hurt him, but I was too mad to feel bad about that yet. He dropped my wrist and folded his arms across his chest, turning from me to glare toward the ocean.

"I'm human," he muttered, his voice almost inaudible.

"You're not as human as Mike," I continued ruthlessly. "Do you still think that's the most important consideration?"

"It's not the same thing." Jacob didn't look away from the gray waves. "I didn't choose this."

I laughed once in disbelief. "Do you think Edward did? He didn't know what was happening to him any more than you did. He didn't exactly sign up for this."

Jacob was shaking his head back and forth with a small, quick movement.

“You know, Jacob, you’re awfully self-righteous — considering that you’re a werewolf and all.”

“It’s not the same,” Jacob repeated, glowering at me.

“I don’t see why not. You could be a bit more understanding about the Cullens. You have no idea how truly good they are — to the core, Jacob.”

He frowned more deeply. “They shouldn’t exist. Their existence goes against nature.”

I stared at him for a long moment with one eyebrow raised incredulously. It was a while before he noticed.

“What?”

“Speaking of unnatural … ,” I hinted.

“Bella,” he said, his voice slow and different. Aged. I realized that he sounded suddenly older than me — like a parent or a teacher. “What I am was born in me. It’s a part of who I am, who my family is, who we all are as a tribe — it’s the reason why we’re still here.

“Besides that” — he looked down at me, his black eyes unreadable — “I am still human.”

He picked up my hand and pressed it to his fever-warm chest. Through his t-shirt, I could feel the steady beating of his heart under my palm.

“Normal humans can’t throw motorcycles around the way you can.”

He smiled a faint, half-smile. “Normal humans run away from monsters, Bella. And I never claimed to be normal. Just human.”

Staying angry with Jacob was too much work. I started to smile as I pulled my hand away from his chest.

“You look plenty human to me,” I allowed. “At the moment.”

“I feel human.” He stared past me, his face far away. His lower lip trembled, and he bit down on it hard.

“Oh, Jake,” I whispered, reaching for his hand.

This was why I was here. This was why I would take whatever reception waited for me when I got back. Because, underneath all the anger and the sarcasm, Jacob was in pain. Right now, it was very clear in his eyes. I didn't know how to help him, but I knew I had to try. It was more than that I owed him. It was because his pain hurt me, too. Jacob had become a part of me, and there was no changing that now.

# Chapter 5
## IMPRINT

"Are you okay, Jake? Charlie said you were having a hard time… . Isn't it getting any better?"

His warm hand curled around mine. "'S not so bad," he said, but he wouldn't meet my eyes.

He walked slowly back to the driftwood bench, staring at the rainbow-colored pebbles, and pulling me along at his side. I sat back down on our tree, but he sat on the wet, rocky ground rather than next to me. I wondered if it was so that he could hide his face more easily. He kept my hand.

I started babbling to fill the silence. "It's been so long since I was here. I've probably missed a ton of things. How are Sam and Emily? And Embry? Did Quil —?"

I broke off mid-sentence, remembering that Jacob's friend Quil had been a sensitive subject.

"Ah, Quil," Jacob sighed.

So then it must have happened — Quil must have joined the pack.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled.

To my surprise, Jacob snorted. "Don't say that to him."

"What do you mean?"

"Quil's not looking for pity. Just the opposite — he's jazzed. Totally thrilled."

This made no sense to me. All the other wolves had been so depressed at the idea of their friend sharing their fate. “Huh?”

Jacob tilted his head back to look at me. He smiled and rolled his eyes.

“Quil thinks it’s the coolest thing that’s ever happened to him. Part of it is finally knowing what’s going on. And he’s excited to have his friends back — to be part of the ‘in crowd.’” Jacob snorted again. “Shouldn’t be surprised, I guess. It’s so Quil.”

“He likes it?”

“Honestly … most of them do,” Jacob admitted slowly. “There are definitely good sides to this — the speed, the freedom, the strength … the sense of — of family… . Sam and I are the only ones who ever felt really bitter. And Sam got past that a long time ago. So I’m the crybaby now.” Jacob laughed at himself.

There were so many things I wanted to know. “Why are you and Sam different? What happened to Sam anyway? What’s his problem?” The questions tumbled out without room to answer them, and Jacob laughed again.

“That’s a long story.”

“I told you a long story. Besides, I’m not in any hurry to get back,” I said, and then I grimaced as I thought of the trouble I would be in.

He looked up at me swiftly, hearing the double edge in my words. “Will he be mad at you?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “He really hates it when I do things he considers … risky.”

"Like hanging out with werewolves."

"Yeah."

Jacob shrugged. "So don't go back. I'll sleep on the couch."

"That's a great idea," I grumbled. "Because then he would come looking for me."

Jacob stiffened, and then smiled bleakly. "Would he?"

"If he was afraid I was hurt or something — probably."

"My idea's sounding better all the time."

"Please, Jake. That really bugs me."

"What does?"

"That you two are so ready to kill each other!" I complained. "It makes me crazy. Why can't you both just be civilized?"

"Is he ready to kill me?" Jacob asked with a grim smile, unconcerned by my anger.

"Not like you seem to be!" I realized I was yelling. "At least he can be a grown-up about this. He knows that hurting you would hurt me — and so he never would. You don't seem to care about that at all!"

"Yeah, right," Jacob muttered. "I'm sure he's quite the pacifist."

"Ugh!" I ripped my hand out of his and shoved his head away. Then I pulled my knees up to my chest and wrapped my arms tightly around them.

I glared out toward the horizon, fuming.

Jacob was quiet for a few minutes. Finally, he got up off the ground and sat beside me, putting his arm around my shoulders. I shook it off.

“Sorry,” he said quietly. “I’ll try to behave myself.”

I didn’t answer.

“Do you still want to hear about Sam?” he offered.

I shrugged.

“Like I said, it’s a long story. And very … strange. There’re so many strange things about this new life. I haven’t had time to tell you the half of it. And this thing with Sam — well, I don’t know if I’ll even be able to explain it right.”

His words pricked my curiosity in spite of my irritation.

“I’m listening,” I said stiffly.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the side of his face pull up in a smile.

“Sam had it so much harder than the rest of us. Because he was the first, and he was alone, and he didn’t have anyone to tell him what was happening. Sam’s grandfather died before he was born, and his father has never been around. There was no one there to recognize the signs. The first time it happened — the first time he phased — he thought he’d gone insane. It took him two weeks to calm down enough to change back.

"This was before you came to Forks, so you wouldn't remember. Sam's mother and Leah Clearwater had the forest rangers searching for him, the police. People thought there had been an accident or something... ."

"Leah?" I asked, surprised. Leah was Harry's daughter. Hearing her name sent an automatic surge of pity through me. Harry Clearwater, Charlie's life-long friend, had died of a heart attack this past spring.

His voice changed, became heavier. "Yeah. Leah and Sam were high school sweethearts. They started dating when she was just a freshman. She was frantic when he disappeared."

"But he and Emily —"

"I'll get to that — it's part of the story," he said. He inhaled slowly, and then exhaled in a gust.

I supposed it was silly for me to imagine that Sam had never loved anyone before Emily. Most people fall in and out of love many times in their lives. It was just that I'd seen Sam with Emily, and I couldn't imagine him with someone else. The way he looked at her … well, it reminded me of a look I'd seen sometimes in Edward's eyes — when he was looking at me.

"Sam came back," Jacob said, "but he wouldn't talk to anyone about where he'd been. Rumors flew — that he was up to no good, mostly. And then Sam happened to run in to Quil's grandfather one afternoon when Old Quil Ateara came to visit Mrs. Uley. Sam shook his hand. Old Quil just about had a stroke." Jacob paused to laugh.

"Why?"

Jacob put his hand on my cheek and pulled my face around to look at him — he was leaning toward me, his face was just a few inches away. His palm burned my skin, like he had a fever.

"Oh, right," I said. It was uncomfortable, having my face so close to his with his hand hot against my skin. "Sam was running a temperature."

Jacob laughed again. "Sam's hand felt like he'd left it sitting on a hot stovetop."

He was so close, I could feel his warm breath. I reached up casually, to take his hand away and free my face, but wound my fingers through his so that I wouldn't hurt his feelings. He smiled and leaned back, undeceived by my attempt at nonchalance.

"So Mr. Ateara went straight to the other elders," Jacob went on. "They were the only ones left who still knew, who remembered. Mr. Ateara, Billy, and Harry had actually seen their grandfathers make the change. When Old Quil told them, they met with Sam secretly and explained.

"It was easier when he understood — when he wasn't alone anymore. They knew he wouldn't be the only one affected by the Cullens' return" — he pronounced the name with unconscious bitterness — "but no one else was old enough. So Sam waited for the rest of us to join him… ."

"The Cullens had no idea," I said in a whisper. "They didn't think that werewolves still existed here. They didn't know that coming here would change you."

"It doesn't change the fact that it did."

"Remind me not to get on your bad side."

"You think I should be as forgiving as you are? We can't all be saints and martyrs."

"Grow up, Jacob."

"I wish I could," he murmured quietly.

I stared at him, trying to make sense of his response. "What?"

Jacob chuckled. "One of those many strange things I mentioned."

"You … can't … grow up?" I said blankly. "You're what? Not … aging? Is that a joke?"

"Nope." He popped his lips on the P.

I felt blood flood my face. Tears — tears of rage — filled my eyes. My teeth mashed together with an audible grinding sound.

"Bella? What did I say?"

I was on my feet again, my hands balled up into fists, my whole frame shaking.

"You. Are. Not. Aging," I growled through my teeth.

Jacob tugged my arm gently, trying to make me sit. "None of us are. What's wrong with you?"

"Am I the only one who has to get old? I get older every stinking day!" I nearly shrieked, throwing my hands in the air. Some little part of me recognized that I was throwing a Charlie-esque fit, but that rational part was greatly overshadowed by the

irrational part. “Damn it! What kind of world is this? Where’s the justice?”

“Take it easy, Bella.”

“Shut up, Jacob. Just shut up! This is so unfair!”

“Did you seriously just stamp your foot? I thought girls only did that on TV.”

I growled unimpressively.

“It’s not as bad as you seem to think it is. Sit down and I’ll explain.”

“I’ll stand.”

He rolled his eyes. “Okay. Whatever you want. But listen, I will get older … someday.”

“Explain.”

He patted the tree. I glowered for a second, but then sat; my temper had burned out as suddenly as it had flared and I’d calmed down enough to realize that I was making a fool of myself.

“When we get enough control to quit … ,” Jacob said. “When we stop phasing for a solid length of time, we age again. It’s not easy.” He shook his head, abruptly doubtful. “It’s gonna take a really long time to learn that kind of restraint, I think. Even Sam’s not there yet. ’Course it doesn’t help that there’s a huge coven of vampires right down the road. We can’t even think about quitting when the tribe needs protectors. But you shouldn’t get all bent out of shape about it, anyway, because I’m already older than you, physically at least.”

"What are you talking about?"

"Look at me, Bells. Do I look sixteen?"

I glanced up and down his mammoth frame, trying to be unbiased. "Not exactly, I guess."

"Not at all. Because we reach full growth inside of a few months when the werewolf gene gets triggered. It's one hell of a growth spurt." He made a face. "Physically, I'm probably twenty-five or something. So there's no need for you to freak out about being too old for me for at least another seven years."

Twenty-five or something. The idea messed with my head. But I remembered that growth spurt — I remembered watching him shoot up and fill out right before my eyes. I remembered how he would look different from one day to the next… . I shook my head, feeling dizzy.

"So, did you want to hear about Sam, or did you want to scream at me some more for things that are out of my control?"

I took a deep breath. "Sorry. Age is a touchy subject for me. That hit a nerve."

Jacob's eyes tightened, and he looked as if he were trying to decide how to word something.

Since I didn't want to talk about the truly touchy stuff — my plans for the future, or treaties that might be broken by said plans, I prompted him. "So once Sam understood what was going on, once he had Billy and Harry and Mr. Ateara, you said it wasn't so hard anymore. And, like you also said, there are the cool parts… ." I hesitated briefly. "Why does Sam hate

them so much? Why does he wish I would hate them?"

Jacob sighed. "This is the really weird part."

"I'm a pro at weird."

"Yeah, I know." He grinned before he continued. "So, you're right. Sam knew what was going on, and everything was almost okay. In most ways, his life was back to, well, not normal. But better." Then Jacob's expression tightened, like something painful was coming. "Sam couldn't tell Leah. We aren't supposed to tell anyone who doesn't have to know. And it wasn't really safe for him to be around her — but he cheated, just like I did with you. Leah was furious that he wouldn't tell her what was going on — where he'd been, where he went at night, why he was always so exhausted — but they were working it out. They were trying. They really loved each other."

"Did she find out? Is that what happened?"

He shook his head. "No, that wasn't the problem. Her cousin, Emily Young, came down from the Makah reservation to visit her one weekend."

I gasped. "Emily is Leah's cousin?"

"Second cousins. They're close, though. They were like sisters when they were kids."

"That's … horrible. How could Sam … ?" I trailed off, shaking my head.

"Don't judge him just yet. Did anyone ever tell you … Have you ever heard of imprinting?"

“Imprinting?” I repeated the unfamiliar word. “No. What’s that mean?”

“It’s one of those bizarre things we have to deal with. It doesn’t happen to everyone. In fact, it’s the rare exception, not the rule. Sam had heard all the stories by then, the stories we all used to think were legends. He’d heard of imprinting, but he never dreamed …”

“What is it?” I prodded.

Jacob’s eyes strayed to the ocean. “Sam did love Leah. But when he saw Emily, that didn’t matter anymore. Sometimes … we don’t exactly know why … we find our mates that way.” His eyes flashed back to me, his face reddening. “I mean … our soul mates.”

“What way? Love at first sight?” I snickered.

Jacob wasn’t smiling. His dark eyes were critical of my reaction. “It’s a little bit more powerful than that. More absolute.”

“Sorry,” I muttered. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I am.”

“Love at first sight? But more powerful?” My voice still sounded dubious, and he could hear that.

“It’s not easy to explain. It doesn’t matter, anyway.” He shrugged indifferently. “You wanted to know what happened to Sam to make him hate the vampires for changing him, to make him hate himself. And that’s what happened. He broke Leah’s heart. He went back on every promise he’d ever made her. Every day he has to see the accusation in her eyes, and know that she’s right.”

He stopped talking abruptly, as if he'd said something he hadn't meant to.

"How did Emily deal with this? If she was so close to Leah ... ?" Sam and Emily were utterly right together, two puzzle pieces, shaped for each other exactly. Still ... how had Emily gotten past the fact that he'd belonged to someone else? Her sister, almost.

"She was real angry, in the beginning. But it's hard to resist that level of commitment and adoration." Jacob sighed. "And then, Sam could tell her everything. There are no rules that can bind you when you find your other half. You know how she got hurt?"

"Yeah." The story in Forks was that she was mauled by a bear, but I was in on the secret.

Werewolves are unstable, Edward had said. The people near them get hurt.

"Well, weirdly enough, that was sort of how they resolved things. Sam was so horrified, so sickened by himself, so full of hate for what he'd done... . He would have thrown himself under a bus if it would have made her feel better. He might have anyway, just to escape what he'd done. He was shattered... . Then, somehow, she was the one comforting him, and after that... ."

Jacob didn't finish his thought, and I sensed the story had gotten too personal to share.

"Poor Emily," I whispered. "Poor Sam. Poor Leah... ."

"Yeah, Leah got the worst end of the stick," he agreed. "She puts on a brave face. She's going to be a bridesmaid."

I gazed away, toward the jagged rocks that rose from the ocean like stubby broken-off fingers on the south rim of the harbor, while I tried to make sense of it all. I could feel his eyes on my face, waiting for me to say something.

"Did it happen to you?" I finally asked, still looking away. "This love-at-first-sight thing?"

"No," he answered briskly. "Sam and Jared are the only ones."

"Hmm," I said, trying to sound only politely interested. I was relieved, and I tried to explain my reaction to myself. I decided I was just glad he didn't claim there was some mystical, wolfy connection between the two of us. Our relationship was confusing enough as it was. I didn't need any more of the supernatural than I already had to deal with.

He was quiet, too, and the silence felt a little awkward. My intuition told me that I didn't want to hear what he was thinking.

"How did that work out for Jared?" I asked to break the silence.

"No drama there. It was just a girl he'd sat next to in school every day for a year and never looked at twice. And then, after he changed, he saw her again and never looked away. Kim was thrilled. She'd had a huge crush on him. She'd had his last name tacked on to the end of hers all over in her diary." He laughed mockingly.

I frowned. "Did Jared tell you that? He shouldn't have."

Jacob bit his lip. “I guess I shouldn’t laugh. It was funny, though.”

“Some soul mate.”

He sighed. “Jared didn’t tell us anything on purpose. I already told you this part, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. You can hear each other’s thoughts, but only when you’re wolves, right?”

“Right. Just like your bloodsucker.” He glowered.

“Edward,” I corrected.

“Sure, sure. That’s how come I know so much about how Sam felt. It’s not like he would have told us all that if he’d had a choice. Actually, that’s something we all hate.” The bitterness was abruptly harsh in his voice. “It’s awful. No privacy, no secrets. Everything you’re ashamed of, laid out for everyone to see.” He shuddered.

“It sounds horrible,” I whispered.

“It is sometimes helpful when we need to coordinate,” he said grudgingly. “Once in a blue moon, when some bloodsucker crosses into our territory. Laurent was fun. And if the Cullens hadn’t gotten in our way last Saturday … ugh!” he groaned. “We could have had her!” His fists clenched into angry balls.

I flinched. As much as I worried about Jasper or Emmett getting hurt, it was nothing like the panic I felt at the idea of Jacob going up against Victoria. Emmett and Jasper were the closest thing to indestructible I could imagine. Jacob was still warm, still comparatively human. Mortal. I thought of Jacob

facing Victoria, her brilliant hair blowing around her oddly feline face … and shuddered.

Jacob looked up at me with a curious expression. “But isn’t it like that for you all the time? Having him in your head?”

“Oh, no. Edward’s never in my head. He only wishes.”

Jacob’s expression became confused.

“He can’t hear me,” I explained, my voice a tiny bit smug from old habit. “I’m the only one like that, for him. We don’t know why he can’t.”

“Weird,” Jacob said.

“Yeah.” The smugness faded. “It probably means there’s something wrong with my brain,” I admitted.

“I already knew there was something wrong with your brain,” Jacob muttered.

“Thanks.”

The sun broke through the clouds suddenly, a surprise I hadn’t been expecting, and I had to narrow my eyes against the glare off the water. Everything changed color — the waves turned from gray to blue, the trees from dull olive to brilliant jade, and the rainbow-hued pebbles glittered like jewels.

We squinted for a moment, letting our eyes adjust. There were no sounds besides the hollow roar of the waves that echoed from every side of the sheltered harbor, the soft grinding of the stones against each other under the water’s movement, and the cry of gulls high overhead. It was very peaceful.

Jacob settled closer to me, so that he was leaning against my arm. He was so warm. After a minute of this, I shrugged out of my rain jacket. He made a little sound of contentment in the back of his throat, and rested his cheek on the top of my head. I could feel the sun heat my skin — thought it was not quite as warm as Jacob — and I wondered idly how long it would take me to burn.

Absentmindedly, I twisted my right hand to the side, and watched the sunlight glitter subtly off the scar James had left there.

“What are you thinking about?” he murmured.

“The sun.”

“Mmm. It’s nice.”

“What are you thinking about?” I asked.

He chuckled to himself. “I was remembering that moronic movie you took me to. And Mike Newton puking all over everything.”

I laughed, too, surprised by how time had changed the memory. It used to be one of stress, of confusion. So much had changed that night… . And now I could laugh. It was the last night Jacob and I had had before he’d learned the truth about his heritage. The last human memory. An oddly pleasant memory now.

“I miss that,” Jacob said. “The way it used to be so easy … uncomplicated. I’m glad I’ve got a good memory.” He sighed.

He felt the sudden tension in my body as his words triggered a memory of my own.

"What is it?" he asked.

"About that good memory of yours …" I pulled away from him so that I could read his face. At the moment, it was confused. "Do you mind telling me what you were doing Monday morning? You were thinking something that bothered Edward." Bothered wasn't quite the word for it, but I wanted an answer, so I thought it was best not to start out too severely.

Jacob's face brightened with understanding, and he laughed. "I was just thinking about you. Didn't like that much, did he?"

"Me? What about me?"

Jacob laughed, with a harder edge this time. "I was remembering the way you looked that night Sam found you — I've seen it in his head, and it's like I was there; that memory has always haunted Sam, you know. And then I remembered how you looked the first time you came to my place. I bet you don't even realize what a mess you were then, Bella. It was weeks before you started to look human again. And I remembered how you always used to have your arms wrapped around yourself, trying to hold yourself together… ." Jacob winced, and then shook his head. "It's hard for me to remember how sad you were, and it wasn't my fault. So I figured it would be harder for him. And I thought he ought to get a look at what he'd done."

I smacked his shoulder. It hurt my hand. "Jacob Black, don't you ever do that again! Promise me you won't."

"No way. I haven't had that much fun in months."

"So help me, Jake —"

"Oh, get a grip, Bella. When am I ever going to see him again? Don't worry about it."

I got to my feet, and he caught my hand as I started to walk away. I tried to tug free.

"I'm leaving, Jacob."

"No, don't go yet," he protested, his hand tightening around mine. "I'm sorry. And ... okay, I won't do it again. Promise."

I sighed. "Thanks, Jake."

"Come on, we'll go back to my house," he said eagerly.

"Actually, I think I really do need to go. Angela Weber is expecting me, and I know Alice is worried. I don't want to upset her too much."

"But you just got here!"

"It feels that way," I agreed. I glared up at the sun, somehow already directly overhead. How had the time passed so quickly?

His eyebrows pulled down over his eyes. "I don't know when I'll see you again," he said in a hurt voice.

"I'll come back the next time he's away," I promised impulsively.

"Away?" Jacob rolled his eyes. "That's a nice way to describe what he's doing. Disgusting parasites."

"If you can't be nice, I won't come back at all!" I threatened, trying to pull my hand free. He refused to let go.

"Aw, don't be mad," he said, grinning. "Knee-jerk reaction."

"If I'm going to try to come back again, you're going to have to get something straight, okay?"

He waited.

"See," I explained. "I don't care who's a vampire and who's a werewolf. That's irrelevant. You are Jacob, and he is Edward, and I am Bella. And nothing else matters."

His eyes narrowed slightly. "But I am a werewolf," he said unwillingly. "And he is a vampire," he added with obvious revulsion.

"And I'm a Virgo!" I shouted, exasperated.

He raised his eyebrows, measuring my expression with curious eyes. Finally, he shrugged.

"If you can really see it that way ..."

"I can. I do."

"Okay. Just Bella and Jacob. None of those freaky Virgos here." He smiled at me, the warm, familiar smile that I had missed so much. I felt the answering smile spread across my face.

"I've really missed you, Jake," I admitted impulsively.

"Me, too," his smile widened. His eyes were happy and clear, free for once of the angry bitterness. "More than you know. Will you come back soon?"

"As soon as I can," I promised.

# Chapter 6

## SWITZERLAND

As I drove home, I wasn't paying much attention to the road that shimmered wetly in the sun. I was thinking about the flood of information Jacob had shared with me, trying to sort it out, to force it all to make sense. Despite the overload, I felt lighter. Seeing Jacob smile, having all the secrets thrashed out ... it didn’t make things perfect, but it made them better. I was right to have gone. Jacob needed me. And obviously, I thought as I squinted into the glare, there was no danger.

It came out of nowhere. One minute there was nothing but bright highway in my rearview mirror. The next minute, the sun was glinting off a silver Volvo right on my tail.

“Aw, crap,” I whimpered.

I considered pulling over. But I was too much of a coward to face him right away. I’d been counting on some prep time ... and having Charlie nearby as a buffer. At least that would force him to keep his voice down.

The Volvo followed inches behind me. I kept my eyes on the road ahead.

Chicken through and through, I drove straight to Angela’s without once meeting the gaze I could feel burning a hole in my mirror.

He followed me until I pulled to the curb in front of the Webers’ house. He didn’t stop, and I didn’t look

up as he passed. I didn't want to see the expression on his face. I ran up the short concrete walk to Angela's door as soon as he was out of sight.

Ben answered the door before I could finish knocking, like he'd been standing right behind it.

"Hey, Bella!" he said, surprised.

"Hi, Ben. Er, is Angela here?" I wondered if Angela had forgotten our plans, and cringed at the thought of going home early.

"Sure," Ben said just as Angela called, "Bella!" and appeared at the top of the stairs.

Ben peered around me as we both heard the sound of a car on the road; the sound didn't scare me — this engine stuttered to a stop, followed by the loud pop of a backfire. Nothing like the purr of the Volvo. This must be the visitor Ben had been waiting for.

"Austin's here," Ben said as Angela reached his side.

A horn honked on the street.

"I'll see you later," Ben promised. "Miss you already."

He threw his arm around Angela's neck and pulled her face down to his height so that he could kiss her enthusiastically. After a second of this, Austin honked again.

"'Bye, Ang! Love you!" Ben shouted as he dashed past me.

Angela swayed, her face slightly pink, then recovered herself and waved until Ben and Austin were out of sight. Then she turned to me and grinned ruefully.

"Thank you for doing this, Bella," she said. "From the bottom of my heart. Not only are you saving my hands from permanent injury, you also just spared me two long hours of a plot-less, badly dubbed martial arts film." She sighed in relief.

"Happy to be of service." I was feeling a bit less panicked, able to breathe a little more evenly. It felt so ordinary here. Angela's easy human dramas were oddly reassuring. It was nice to know that life was normal somewhere.

I followed Angela up the stairs to her room. She kicked toys out of the way as she went. The house was unusually quiet.

"Where's your family?"

"My parents took the twins to a birthday party in Port Angeles. I can't believe you're really going to help me with this. Ben's pretending he has tendonitis." She made a face.

"I don't mind at all," I said, and then I walked into Angela's room and saw the stacks of waiting envelopes.

"Oh!" I gasped. Angela turned to look at me, apologies in her eyes. I could see why she'd been putting this off, and why Ben had weaseled out.

"I thought you were exaggerating," I admitted.

"I wish. Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Put me to work. I've got all day."

Angela divided a pile in half and put her mother's address book between us on her desk. For a while we

concentrated, and there was just the sound of our pens scratching quietly across the paper.

"What's Edward doing tonight?" she asked after a few minutes.

My pen dug into the envelope I was working on. "Emmet's home for the weekend. They're supposed to be hiking."

"You say that like you're not sure."

I shrugged.

"You're lucky Edward has his brothers for all the hiking and camping. I don't know what I'd do if Ben didn't have Austin for the guy stuff."

"Yeah, the outdoors thing is not really for me. And there's no way I'd ever be able to keep up."

Angela laughed. "I prefer the indoors myself."

She focused on her pile for a minute. I wrote out four more addresses. There was never any pressure to fill a pause with meaningless chatter around Angela. Like Charlie, she was comfortable with silence.

But, like Charlie, she was also too observant sometimes.

"Is something wrong?" she asked in a low voice now. "You seem ... anxious."

I smiled sheepishly. "Is it that obvious?"

"Not really."

She was probably lying to make me feel better.

“You don’t have to talk about it unless you want to,” she assured me. “I’ll listen if you think it will help.”

I was about to say thanks, but no thanks. After all, there were just too many secrets I was bound to keep. I really couldn’t discuss my problems with someone human. That was against the rules.

And yet, with a strange, sudden intensity, that’s exactly what I wanted. I wanted to talk to a normal human girlfriend. I wanted to moan a little bit, like any other teenage girl. I wanted my problems to be that simple. It would also be nice to have someone outside the whole vampire-werewolf mess to put things in perspective. Someone unbiased.

“I’ll mind my own business,” Angela promised, smiling down at the address she was working on.

“No,” I said. “You’re right. I am anxious. It’s … it’s Edward.”

“What’s wrong?”

It was so easy to talk to Angela. When she asked a question like that, I could tell that she wasn’t just morbidly curious or looking for gossip, like Jessica would have been. She cared that I was upset.

“Oh, he’s mad at me.”

“That’s hard to imagine,” she said. “What’s he mad about?”

I sighed. “Do you remember Jacob Black?”

“Ah,” she said.

“Yeah.”

"He's jealous."

"No, not jealous ..." I should have kept my mouth shut. There was no way to explain this right. But I wanted to keep talking anyway. I hadn't realized I was so starved for human conversation. "Edward thinks Jacob is ... a bad influence, I guess. Sort of ... dangerous. You know how much trouble I got in a few months back... . It's all ridiculous, though."

I was surprised to see Angela shaking her head.

"What?" I asked.

"Bella, I've seen how Jacob Black looks at you. I'd bet the real problem is jealousy."

"It's not like that with Jacob."

"For you, maybe. But for Jacob ..."

I frowned. "Jacob knows how I feel. I've told him everything."

"Edward's only human, Bella. He's going to react like any other boy."

I grimaced. I didn't have a response to that.

She patted my hand. "He'll get over it."

"I hope so. Jake's going through kind of a tough time. He needs me."

"You and Jacob are pretty close, aren't you?"

"Like family," I agreed.

"And Edward doesn't like him… . That must be hard. I wonder how Ben would handle that?" she mused.

I half-smiled. "Probably just like any other boy."

She grinned. "Probably."

Then she changed the subject. Angela wasn't one to pry, and she seemed to sense I wouldn't — couldn't — say any more.

"I got my dorm assignment yesterday. The farthest building from campus, naturally."

"Does Ben know where he's staying yet?"

"The closest dorm to campus. He's got all the luck. How about you? Did you decide where you're going?"

I stared down, concentrating on the clumsy scrawl of my handwriting. For a second I was distracted by the thought of Angela and Ben at the University of Washington. They would be off to Seattle in just a few months. Would it be safe then? Would the wild young vampire menace have moved elsewhere? Would there be a new place by then, some other city flinching from horror-movie headlines?

Would those new headlines be my fault?

I tried to shake it off and answered her question a beat late. "Alaska, I think. The university there in Juneau."

I could hear the surprise in her voice. "Alaska? Oh. Really? I mean, that's great. I just figured you'd go somewhere … warmer."

I laughed a little, still staring at the envelope. “Yeah. Forks has really changed my perspective on life.”

“And Edward?”

Though his name set butterflies fluttering in my stomach, I looked up and grinned at her. “Alaska’s not too cold for Edward, either.”

She grinned back. “Of course not.” And then she sighed. “It’s so far. You won’t be able to come home very often. I’ll miss you. Will you e-mail me?”

A swell of quiet sadness crashed over me; maybe it was a mistake to get closer to Angela now. But wouldn’t it be sadder still to miss out on these last chances? I shook off the unhappy thoughts, so that I could answer her teasingly.

“If I can type again after this.” I nodded toward the stack of envelopes I’d done.

We laughed, and it was easy then to chat cheerfully about classes and majors while we finished the rest — all I had to do was not think about it. Anyway, there were more urgent things to worry about today.

I helped her put the stamps on, too. I was afraid to leave.

“How’s your hand?” she asked.

I flexed my fingers. “I think I’ll recover the full use of it … someday.”

The door banged downstairs, and we both looked up.

“Ang?” Ben called.

I tried to smile, but my lips trembled. “I guess that’s my cue to leave.”

“You don’t have to go. Though he’s probably going to describe the movie for me … in detail.”

“Charlie will be wondering where I am anyway.”

“Thanks for helping me.”

“I had a good time, actually. We should do something like this again. It was nice to have some girl time.”

“Definitely.”

There was a light knock on the bedroom door.

“Come in, Ben,” Angela said.

I got up and stretched.

“Hey, Bella! You survived,” Ben greeted me quickly before going to take my place by Angela. He eyed our work. “Nice job. Too bad there’s nothing left to do, I would have …” He let the thought trail off, and then restarted excitedly. “Ang, I can’t believe you missed this one! It was awesome. There was this final fight sequence — the choreography was unbelievable! This one guy — well, you’re going to have to see it to know what I’m talking about —”

Angela rolled her eyes at me.

“See you at school,” I said with a nervous laugh.

She sighed. “See you.”

I was jumpy on the way out to my truck, but the street was empty. I spent the whole drive glancing

anxiously in all my mirrors, but there was never any sign of the silver car.

His car was not in front of the house, either, though that meant little.

“Bella?” Charlie called when I opened the front door.

“Hey, Dad.”

I found him in the living room, in front of the TV.

“So, how was your day?”

“Good,” I said. Might as well tell him everything — he’d hear it from Billy soon enough. Besides, it would make him happy. “They didn’t need me at work, so I went down to La Push.”

There wasn’t enough surprise in his face. Billy had already talked to him.

“How’s Jacob?” Charlie asked, attempting to sound indifferent.

“Good,” I said, just as casual.

“You get over to the Webers’?”

“Yep. We got all her announcements addressed.”

“That’s nice.” Charlie smiled a wide smile. He was strangely focused, considering that there was a game on. “I’m glad you spent some time with your friends today.”

“Me, too.”

I ambled toward the kitchen, looking for busy work. Unfortunately, Charlie had already cleaned up his lunch. I stood there for a few minutes, staring at the bright patch of light the sun made on the floor. But I knew I couldn't delay this forever.

"I'm going to go study," I announced glumly as I headed up the stairs.

"See you later," Charlie called after me.

If I survive, I thought to myself.

I shut my bedroom door carefully before I turned to face my room.

Of course he was there. He stood against the wall across from me, in the shadow beside the open window. His face was hard and his posture tense. He glared at me wordlessly.

I cringed, waiting for the torrent, but it didn't come. He just continued to glare, possibly too angry to speak.

"Hi," I finally said.

His face could have been carved from stone. I counted to a hundred in my head, but there was no change.

"Er … so, I'm still alive," I began.

A growl rumbled low in his chest, but his expression didn't change.

"No harm done," I insisted with a shrug.

He moved. His eyes closed, and he pinched the bridge of his nose between the fingers of his right hand.

"Bella," he whispered. "Do you have any idea how close I came to crossing the line today? To breaking the treaty and coming after you? Do you know what that would have meant?"

I gasped and his eyes opened. They were as cold and hard as night.

"You can't!" I said too loudly. I worked to modulate the volume of my voice so Charlie wouldn't hear, but I wanted to shout the words. "Edward, they'd use any excuse for a fight. They'd love that. You can't ever break the rules!"

"Maybe they aren't the only ones who would enjoy a fight."

"Don't you start," I snapped. "You made the treaty — you stick to it."

"If he'd hurt you —"

"Enough!" I cut him off. "There's nothing to worry about. Jacob isn't dangerous."

"Bella." He rolled his eyes. "You aren't exactly the best judge of what is or isn't dangerous."

"I know I don't have to worry about Jake. And neither do you."

He ground his teeth together. His hands were balled up in fists at his sides. He was still standing against the wall, and I hated the space between us.

I took a deep breath, and crossed the room. He didn't move when I wrapped my arms around him. Next to the warmth of the last of the afternoon sun streaming

through the window, his skin felt especially icy. He seemed like ice, too, frozen the way he was.

"I'm sorry I made you anxious," I muttered.

He sighed, and relaxed a little. His arms wound around my waist.

"Anxious is a bit of an understatement," he murmured. "It was a very long day."

"You weren't supposed to know about it," I reminded him. "I thought you'd be hunting longer."

I looked up at his face, at his defensive eyes; I hadn't noticed in the stress of the moment, but they were too dark. The rings under them were deep purple. I frowned in disapproval.

"When Alice saw you disappear, I came back," he explained.

"You shouldn't have done that. Now you'll have to go away again." My frown intensified.

"I can wait."

"That's ridiculous. I mean, I know she couldn't see me with Jacob, but you should have known —"

"But I didn't," he broke in. "And you can't expect me to let you —"

"Oh, yes, I can," I interrupted him. "That's exactly what I expect —"

"This won't happen again."

"That's right! Because you're not going to overreact next time."

"Because there isn't going to be a next time."

"I understand when you have to leave, even if I don't like it —"

"That's not the same. I'm not risking my life."

"Neither am I."

"Werewolves constitute a risk."

"I disagree."

"I'm not negotiating this, Bella."

"Neither am I."

His hands were in fists again. I could feel them against my back.

The words popped out thoughtlessly. "Is this really just about my safety?"

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"You aren't …" Angela's theory seemed sillier now than before. It was hard to finish the thought. "I mean, you know better than to be jealous, right?"

He raised one eyebrow. "Do I?"

"Be serious."

"Easily — there's nothing remotely humorous about this."

I frowned suspiciously. "Or … is this something else altogether? Some vampires-and-werewolves-are-always-enemies nonsense? Is this just a testosterone-fueled —"

His eyes blazed. "This is only about you. All I care is that you're safe."

The black fire in his eyes was impossible to doubt.

"Okay," I sighed. "I believe that. But I want you to know something — when it comes to all this enemies nonsense, I'm out. I am a neutral country. I am Switzerland. I refuse to be affected by territorial disputes between mythical creatures. Jacob is family. You are … well, not exactly the love of my life, because I expect to love you for much longer than that. The love of my existence. I don't care who's a werewolf and who's a vampire. If Angela turns out to be a witch, she can join the party, too."

He stared at me silently through narrowed eyes.

"Switzerland," I repeated again for emphasis.

He frowned at me, and then sighed. "Bella … ," he began, but he paused, and his nose wrinkled in disgust.

"What now?"

"Well … don't be offended, but you smell like a dog," he told me.

And then he smiled crookedly, so I knew the fight was over. For now.

Edward had to make up for the missed hunting trip, and so he was leaving Friday night with Jasper,

Emmett, and Carlisle to hit some reserve in Northern California with a mountain lion problem.

We'd come to no agreement on the werewolf issue, but I didn't feel guilty calling Jake — during my brief window of opportunity when Edward took the Volvo home before climbing back in through my window — to let him know I'd be coming over on Saturday again. It wasn't sneaking around. Edward knew how I felt. And if he broke my truck again, then I'd have Jacob pick me up. Forks was neutral, just like Switzerland — just like me.

So when I got off work Thursday and it was Alice rather than Edward waiting for me in the Volvo, I was not suspicious at first. The passenger door was open, and music I didn't recognize was shaking the frame when the bass played.

"Hey, Alice," I shouted over the wailing as I climbed in. "Where's your brother?"

She was singing along to the song, her voice an octave higher than the melody, weaving through it with a complicated harmony. She nodded at me, ignoring my question as she concentrated on the music.

I shut my door and put my hands over my ears. She grinned, and turned the volume down until it was just background. Then she hit the locks and the gas in the same second.

"What's going on?" I asked, starting to feel uneasy. "Where is Edward?"

She shrugged. "They left early."

“Oh.” I tried to control the absurd disappointment. If he left early, that meant he’d be back sooner, I reminded myself.

“All the boys went, and we’re having a slumber party!” she announced in a trilling, singsong voice.

“A slumber party?” I repeated, the suspicion finally settling in.

“Aren’t you excited?” she crowed.

I met her animated gaze for a long second.

“You’re kidnapping me, aren’t you?”

She laughed and nodded. “Till Saturday. Esme cleared it with Charlie; you’re staying with me two nights, and I will drive you to and from school tomorrow.”

I turned my face to the window, my teeth grinding together.

“Sorry,” Alice said, not sounding in the least bit penitent. “He paid me off.”

“How?” I hissed through my teeth.

“The Porsche. It’s exactly like the one I stole in Italy.” She sighed happily. “I’m not supposed to drive it around Forks, but if you want, we could see how long it takes to get from here to L.A. — I bet I could have you back by midnight.”

I took a deep breath. “I think I’ll pass,” I sighed, repressing a shudder.

We wound, always too fast, down the long drive. Alice pulled around to the garage, and I quickly looked over the cars. Emmett's big jeep was there, with a shiny canary yellow Porsche between it and Rosalie's red convertible.

Alice hopped out gracefully and went to stroke her hand along the length of her bribe. "Pretty, isn't it?"

"Pretty over-the-top," I grumbled, incredulous. "He gave you that just for two days of holding me hostage?"

Alice made a face.

A second later, comprehension came and I gasped in horror. "It's for every time he's gone, isn't it?"

She nodded.

I slammed my door and stomped toward the house. She danced along next to me, still unrepentant.

"Alice, don't you think this is just a little bit controlling? Just a tiny bit psychotic, maybe?"

"Not really." She sniffed. "You don't seem to grasp how dangerous a young werewolf can be. Especially when I can't see them. Edward has no way to know if you're safe. You shouldn't be so reckless."

My voice turned acidic. "Yes, because a vampire slumber party is the pinnacle of safety conscious behavior."

Alice laughed. "I'll give you a pedicure and everything," she promised.

It wasn't so bad, except for the fact that I was being held against my will. Esme brought Italian food — the good stuff, all the way from Port Angeles — and Alice was prepared with my favorite movies. Even Rosalie was there, quietly in the background. Alice did insist on the pedicure, and I wondered if she was working from a list — maybe something she'd compiled from watching bad sitcoms.

"How late do you want to stay up?" she asked when my toenails were glistening a bloody red. Her enthusiasm remained untouched by my mood.

"I don't want to stay up. We have school in the morning."

She pouted.

"Where am I supposed to sleep, anyway?" I measured the couch with my eyes. It was a little short. "Can't you just keep me under surveillance at my house?"

"What kind of a slumber party would that be?" Alice shook her head in exasperation. "You're sleeping in Edward's room."

I sighed. His black leather sofa was longer than this one. Actually, the gold carpet in his room was probably thick enough that the floor wouldn't be half bad either.

"Can I go back to my place to get my things, at least?"

She grinned. "Already taken care of."

"Am I allowed to use your phone?"

"Charlie knows where you are."

"I wasn't going to call Charlie." I frowned. "Apparently, I have some plans to cancel."

"Oh." She deliberated. "I'm not sure about that."

"Alice!" I whined loudly. "C'mon!"

"Okay, okay," she said, flitting from the room. She was back in half a second, cell phone in hand. "He didn't specifically prohibit this … ," she murmured to herself as she handed it to me.

I dialed Jacob's number, hoping he wasn't out running with his friends tonight. Luck was with me — Jacob was the one to answer.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Jake, it's me." Alice watched me with expressionless eyes for a second, before she turned and went to sit between Rosalie and Esme on the sofa.

"Hi, Bella," Jacob said, suddenly cautious. "What's up?"

"Nothing good. I can't come over Saturday after all."

It was silent for a minute. "Stupid bloodsucker," he finally muttered. "I thought he was leaving. Can't you have a life when he's gone? Or does he lock you in a coffin?"

I laughed.

"I don't think that's funny."

"I'm only laughing because you're close," I told him. "But he's going to be here Saturday, so it doesn't matter."

"Will he be feeding there in Forks, then?" Jacob asked cuttingly.

"No." I didn't let myself get irritated with him. I wasn't that far from being as angry as he was. "He left early."

"Oh. Well, hey, come over now, then," he said with sudden enthusiasm. "It's not that late. Or I'll come up to Charlie's."

"I wish. I'm not at Charlie's," I said sourly. "I'm kind of being held prisoner."

He was silent as that sunk in, and then he growled. "We'll come and get you," he promised in a flat voice, slipping automatically into a plural.

A chill slid down my spine, but I answered in a light and teasing voice. "Tempting. I have been tortured — Alice painted my toenails."

"I'm serious."

"Don't be. They're just trying to keep me safe."

He growled again.

"I know it's silly, but their hearts are in the right place."

"Their hearts!" he scoffed.

"Sorry about Saturday," I apologized. "I've got to hit the sack" — the couch, I corrected mentally — "but I'll call you again soon."

"Are you sure they'll let you?" he asked in a scathing tone.

"Not completely." I sighed. "'Night, Jake."

"See you around."

Alice was abruptly at my side, her hand held out for the phone, but I was already dialing. She saw the number.

"I don't think he'll have his phone on him," she said.

"I'll leave a message."

The phone rang four times, followed by a beep. There was no greeting.

"You are in trouble," I said slowly, emphasizing each word. "Enormous trouble. Angry grizzly bears are going to look tame next to what is waiting for you at home."

I snapped the phone shut and placed it in her waiting hand. "I'm done."

She grinned. "This hostage stuff is fun."

"I'm going to sleep now," I announced, heading for the stairs. Alice tagged along.

"Alice," I sighed. "I'm not going to sneak out. You would know if I was planning to, and you'd catch me if I tried."

"I'm just going to show you where your things are," she said innocently.

Edward's room was at the farthest end of the third floor hallway, hard to mistake even when the huge house had been less familiar. But when I switched the light on, I paused in confusion. Had I picked the wrong door?

Alice giggled.

It was the same room, I realized quickly; the furniture had just been rearranged. The couch was pushed to the north wall and the stereo shoved up against the vast shelves of CDs — to make room for the colossal bed that now dominated the central space.

The southern wall of glass reflected the scene back like a mirror, making it look twice as bad.

It matched. The coverlet was a dull gold, just lighter than the walls; the frame was black, made of intricately patterned wrought iron. Sculpted metal roses wound in vines up the tall posts and formed a bowery lattice overhead. My pajamas were folded neatly on the foot of the bed, my bag of toiletries to one side.

"What the hell is all this?" I spluttered.

"You didn't really think he would make you sleep on the couch, did you?"

I mumbled unintelligibly as I stalked forward to snatch my things off the bed.

"I'll give you some privacy," Alice laughed. "See you in the morning."

After my teeth were brushed and I was dressed, I grabbed a puffy feather pillow off the huge bed and dragged the gold cover to the couch. I knew I was

being silly, but I didn't care. Porsches as bribes and king-sized beds in houses where nobody slept — it was beyond irritating. I flipped off the lights and curled up on the sofa, wondering if I was too annoyed to sleep.

In the dark, the glass wall was no longer a black mirror, doubling the room. The light of the moon brightened the clouds outside the window. As my eyes adjusted, I could see the diffused glow highlighting the tops of the trees, and glinting off a small slice of the river. I watched the silver light, waiting for my eyes to get heavy.

There was a light knock on the door.

"What, Alice?" I hissed. I was on the defensive, imagining her amusement when she saw my makeshift bed.

"It's me," Rosalie said softly, opening the door enough that I could see the silver glow touch her perfect face. "Can I come in?"

# Chapter 7

## UNHAPPY ENDING

Rosalie hesitated in the doorway, her breathtaking face unsure.

"Of course," I replied, my voice an octave high with surprise. "Come on in."

I sat up, sliding to the end of the sofa to make room. My stomach twisted nervously as the one Cullen who did not like me moved silently to sit down in the open space. I tried to come up with a reason why she would want to see me, but my mind was a blank on that point.

"Do you mind talking to me for a few minutes?" she asked. "I didn't wake you or anything, did I?" Her eyes shifted to the stripped bed and back to my couch.

"No, I was awake. Sure, we can talk." I wondered if she could hear the alarm in my voice as clearly as I could.

She laughed lightly, and it sounded like a chorus of bells. "He so rarely leaves you alone," she said. "I figured I'd better make the best of this opportunity."

What did she want to say that couldn't be said in front of Edward? My hands twisted and untwisted around the edge of the comforter.

"Please don't think I'm horribly interfering," Rosalie said, her voice gentle and almost pleading. She folded her hands in her lap and looked down at them as she spoke. "I'm sure I've hurt your feelings enough in the past, and I don't want to do that again."

"Don't worry about it, Rosalie. My feelings are great. What is it?"

She laughed again, sounding oddly embarrassed. "I'm going to try to tell you why I think you should stay human — why I would stay human if I were you."

"Oh."

She smiled at the shocked tone of my voice, and then she sighed.

"Did Edward ever tell you what led to this?" she asked, gesturing to her glorious immortal body.

I nodded slowly, suddenly somber. "He said it was close to what happened to me that time in Port Angeles, only no one was there to save you." I shuddered at the memory.

"Is that really all he told you?" she asked.

"Yes," I said, my voice blank with confusion. "Was there more?"

She looked up at me and smiled; it was a harsh, bitter — but still stunning — expression.

"Yes," she said. "There was more."

I waited while she stared out the window. She seemed to be trying to calm herself.

"Would you like to hear my story, Bella? It doesn't have a happy ending — but which of ours does? If we had happy endings, we'd all be under gravestones now."

I nodded, though I was frightened by the edge in her voice.

"I lived in a different world than you do, Bella. My human world was a much simpler place. It was nineteen thirty-three. I was eighteen, and I was beautiful. My life was perfect."

She stared out the window at the silver clouds, her expression far away.

"My parents were thoroughly middle class. My father had a stable job in a bank, something I realize now that he was smug about — he saw his prosperity as a reward for talent and hard work, rather than acknowledging the luck involved. I took it all for granted then; in my home, it was as if the Great Depression was only a troublesome rumor. Of course I saw the poor people, the ones who weren't as lucky. My father left me with the impression that they'd brought their troubles on themselves.

"It was my mother's job to keep our house — and myself and my two younger brothers — in spotless order. It was clear that I was both her first priority and her favorite. I didn't fully understand at the time, but I was always vaguely aware that my parents weren't satisfied with what they had, even if it was so much more than most. They wanted more. They had social aspirations — social climbers, I suppose you could call them. My beauty was like a gift to them. They saw so much more potential in it than I did.

"They weren't satisfied, but I was. I was thrilled to be me, to be Rosalie Hale. Pleased that men's eyes watched me everywhere I went, from the year I turned twelve. Delighted that my girlfriends sighed with envy when they touched my hair. Happy that my mother

was proud of me and that my father liked to buy me pretty dresses.

“I knew what I wanted out of life, and there didn’t seem to be any way that I wouldn’t get exactly what I wanted. I wanted to be loved, to be adored. I wanted to have a huge, flowery wedding, where everyone in town would watch me walk down the aisle on my father’s arm and think I was the most beautiful thing they’d ever seen. Admiration was like air to me, Bella. I was silly and shallow, but I was content.” She smiled, amused at her own evaluation.

“My parents’ influence had been such that I also wanted the material things of life. I wanted a big house with elegant furnishings that someone else would clean and a modern kitchen that someone else would cook in. As I said, shallow. Young and very shallow. And I didn’t see any reason why I wouldn’t get these things.

“There were a few things I wanted that were more meaningful. One thing in particular. My very closest friend was a girl named Vera. She married young, just seventeen. She married a man my parents would never have considered for me — a carpenter. A year later she had a son, a beautiful little boy with dimples and curly black hair. It was the first time I’d ever felt truly jealous of anyone else in my entire life.”

She looked at me with unfathomable eyes. “It was a different time. I was the same age as you, but I was ready for it all. I yearned for my own little baby. I wanted my own house and a husband who would kiss me when he got home from work — just like Vera. Only I had a very different kind of house in mind… .”

It was hard for me to imagine the world that Rosalie had known. Her story sounded more like a fairy tale

than history to me. With a slight shock, I realized that this was very close to the world that Edward would have experienced when he was human, the world he had grown up in. I wondered — while Rosalie sat silent for a moment — if my world seemed as baffling to him as Rosalie's did to me?

Rosalie sighed, and when she spoke again her voice was different, the wistfulness gone.

"In Rochester, there was one royal family — the Kings, ironically enough. Royce King owned the bank my father worked at, and nearly every other really profitable business in town. That's how his son, Royce King the Second" — her mouth twisted around the name, it came out through her teeth — "saw me the first time. He was going to take over at the bank, and so he began overseeing the different positions. Two days later, my mother conveniently forgot to send my father's lunch to work with him. I remember being confused when she insisted that I wear my white organza and roll my hair up just to run over to the bank." Rosalie laughed without humor.

"I didn't notice Royce watching me particularly. Everyone watched me. But that night the first of the roses came. Every night of our courtship, he sent a bouquet of roses to me. My room was always overflowing with them. It got to the point that I would smell like roses when I left the house.

"Royce was handsome, too. He had lighter hair than I did, and pale blue eyes. He said my eyes were like violets, and then those started showing up alongside the roses.

"My parents approved — that's putting it mildly. This was everything they'd dreamed of. And Royce seemed to be everything I'd dreamed of. The fairy tale prince,

come to make me a princess. Everything I wanted, yet it was still no more than I expected. We were engaged before I'd known him for two months.

"We didn't spend a great deal of time alone with each other. Royce told me he had many responsibilities at work, and, when we were together, he liked people to look at us, to see me on his arm. I liked that, too. There were lots of parties, dancing, and pretty dresses. When you were a King, every door was open for you, every red carpet rolled out to greet you.

"It wasn't a long engagement. Plans went ahead for the most lavish wedding. It was going to be everything I'd ever wanted. I was completely happy. When I called at Vera's, I no longer felt jealous. I pictured my fair-haired children playing on the huge lawns of the Kings' estate, and I pitied her."

Rosalie broke off suddenly, clenching her teeth together. It pulled me out of her story, and I realized that the horror was not far off. There would be no happy ending, as she'd promised. I wondered if this was why she had so much more bitterness in her than the rest of them — because she'd been within reach of everything she'd wanted when her human life was cut short.

"I was at Vera's that night," Rosalie whispered. Her face was smooth as marble, and as hard. "Her little Henry really was adorable, all smiles and dimples — he was just sitting up on his own. Vera walked me to the door as I was leaving, her baby in her arms and her husband at her side, his arm around her waist. He kissed her on the cheek when he thought I wasn't looking. That bothered me. When Royce kissed me, it wasn't quite the same — not so sweet somehow... . I shoved that thought aside. Royce was my prince. Someday, I would be queen."

It was hard to tell in the moonlight, but it looked like her bone white face got paler.

“It was dark in the streets, the lamps already on. I hadn’t realized how late it was.” She continued to whisper almost inaudibly. “It was cold, too. Very cold for late April. The wedding was only a week away, and I was worrying about the weather as I hurried home — I can remember that clearly. I remember every detail about that night. I clung to it so hard ... in the beginning. I thought of nothing else. And so I remember this, when so many pleasant memories have faded away completely... .”

She sighed, and began whispering again. “Yes, I was worrying about the weather... . I didn’t want to have to move the wedding indoors... .

“I was a few streets from my house when I heard them. A cluster of men under a broken streetlamp, laughing too loud. Drunk. I wished I’d called my father to escort me home, but the way was so short, it seemed silly. And then he called my name.

“‘Rose!’ he yelled, and the others laughed stupidly.

“I hadn’t realized the drunks were so well dressed. It was Royce and some of his friends, sons of other rich men.

“‘Here’s my Rose!’ Royce shouted, laughing with them, sounding just as stupid. ‘You’re late. We’re cold, you’ve kept us waiting so long.’”

“I’d never seen him drink before. A toast, now and then, at a party. He’d told me he didn’t like champagne. I hadn’t realized that he preferred something much stronger.

"He had a new friend — the friend of a friend, come up from Atlanta.

"'What did I tell you, John,' Royce crowed, grabbing my arm and pulling me closer. 'Isn't she lovelier than all your Georgia peaches?'

"The man named John was dark-haired and suntanned. He looked me over like I was a horse he was buying.

"'It's hard to tell,' he drawled slowly. 'She's all covered up.'

"They laughed, Royce like the rest.

"Suddenly, Royce ripped my jacket from my shoulders — it was a gift from him — popping the brass buttons off. They scattered all over the street.

"'Show him what you look like, Rose!' He laughed again and then he tore my hat out of my hair. The pins wrenched my hair from the roots, and I cried out in pain. They seemed to enjoy that — the sound of my pain… ."

Rosalie looked at me suddenly, as if she'd forgotten I was there. I was sure my face was as white as hers. Unless it was green.

"I won't make you listen to the rest," she said quietly. "They left me in the street, still laughing as they stumbled away. They thought I was dead. They were teasing Royce that he would have to find a new bride. He laughed and said he'd have to learn some patience first.

"I waited in the road to die. It was cold, though there was so much pain that I was surprised it bothered

me. It started to snow, and I wondered why I wasn't dying. I was impatient for death to come, to end the pain. It was taking so long… .

"Carlisle found me then. He'd smelled the blood, and come to investigate. I remember being vaguely irritated as he worked over me, trying to save my life. I'd never liked Dr. Cullen or his wife and her brother — as Edward pretended to be then. It had upset me that they were all more beautiful than I was, especially that the men were. But they didn't mingle in society, so I'd only seen them once or twice.

"I thought I'd died when he pulled me from the ground and ran with me — because of the speed — it felt like I was flying. I remembered being horrified that the pain didn't stop… .

"Then I was in a bright room, and it was warm. I was slipping away, and I was grateful as the pain began to dull. But suddenly something sharp was cutting me, my throat, my wrists, my ankles. I screamed in shock, thinking he'd brought me there to hurt me more. Then fire started burning through me, and I didn't care about anything else. I begged him to kill me. When Esme and Edward returned home, I begged them to kill me, too. Carlisle sat with me. He held my hand and said that he was so sorry, promising that it would end. He told me everything, and sometimes I listened. He told me what he was, what I was becoming. I didn't believe him. He apologized each time I screamed.

"Edward wasn't happy. I remember hearing them discuss me. I stopped screaming sometimes. It did no good to scream.

"'What were you thinking, Carlisle?' Edward said. 'Rosalie Hale?'" Rosalie imitated Edward's irritated

tone to perfection. “I didn’t like the way he said my name, like there was something wrong with me.

“‘I couldn’t just let her die,’ Carlisle said quietly. ‘It was too much — too horrible, too much waste.’

“‘I know,’ Edward said, and I thought he sounded dismissive. It angered me. I didn’t know then that he really could see exactly what Carlisle had seen.

“‘It was too much waste. I couldn’t leave her,’ Carlisle repeated in a whisper.

“‘Of course you couldn’t,’ Esme agreed.

“‘People die all the time,’ Edward reminded him in a hard voice. ‘Don’t you think she’s just a little recognizable, though? The Kings will have to put up a huge search — not that anyone suspects the fiend,’ he growled.

“It pleased me that they seemed to know that Royce was guilty.

“I didn’t realize that it was almost over — that I was getting stronger and that was why I was able to concentrate on what they were saying. The pain was beginning to fade from my fingertips.

“‘What are we going to do with her?’ Edward said disgustedly — or that’s how it sounded to me, at least.

“Carlisle sighed. ‘That’s up to her, of course. She may want to go her own way.’

“I’d believed enough of what he’d told me that his words terrified me. I knew that my life was ended,

and there was no going back for me. I couldn't stand the thought of being alone... .

"The pain finally ended and they explained to me again what I was. This time I believed. I felt the thirst, my hard skin; I saw my brilliant red eyes.

"Shallow as I was, I felt better when I saw my reflection in the mirror the first time. Despite the eyes, I was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen." She laughed at herself for a moment. "It took some time before I began to blame the beauty for what had happened to me — for me to see the curse of it. To wish that I had been ... well, not ugly, but normal. Like Vera. So I could have been allowed to marry someone who loved me, and have pretty babies. That's what I'd really wanted, all along. It still doesn't seem like too much to have asked for."

She was thoughtful for a moment, and I wondered if she'd forgotten my presence again. But then she smiled at me, her expression suddenly triumphant.

"You know, my record is almost as clean as Carlisle's," she told me. "Better than Esme. A thousand times better than Edward. I've never tasted human blood," she announced proudly.

She understood my puzzled expression as I wondered why her record was only almost as clean.

"I did murder five humans," she told me in a complacent tone. "If you can really call them human. But I was very careful not to spill their blood — I knew I wouldn't be able to resist that, and I didn't want any part of them in me, you see.

"I saved Royce for last. I hoped that he would hear of his friends' deaths and understand, know what was

coming for him. I hoped the fear would make the end worse for him. I think it worked. He was hiding inside a windowless room behind a door as thick as a bank vault's, guarded outside by armed men, when I caught up with him. Oops — seven murders," she corrected herself. "I forgot about his guards. They only took a second."

"I was overly theatrical. It was kind of childish, really. I wore a wedding dress I'd stolen for the occasion. He screamed when he saw me. He screamed a lot that night. Saving him for last was a good idea — it made it easier for me to control myself, to make it slower —"

She broke off suddenly, and she glanced down at me. "I'm sorry," she said in a chagrined voice. "I'm frightening you, aren't I?"

"I'm fine," I lied.

"I got carried away."

"Don't worry about it."

"I'm surprised Edward didn't tell you more about it."

"He doesn't like to tell other people's stories — he feels like he's betraying confidences, because he hears so much more than just the parts they mean for him to hear."

She smiled and shook her head. "I probably ought to give him more credit. He's really quite decent, isn't he?"

"I think so."

"I can tell." Then she sighed. "I haven't been fair to you, either, Bella. Did he tell you why? Or was that too confidential?"

"He said it was because I was human. He said it was harder for you to have someone on the outside who knew."

Rosalie's musical laughter interrupted me. "Now I really feel guilty. He's been much, much kinder to me than I deserve." She seemed warmer as she laughed, like she'd let down some guard that had never been absent in my presence before. "What a liar that boy is." She laughed again.

"He was lying?" I asked, suddenly wary.

"Well, that's probably putting it too strongly. He just didn't tell you the whole story. What he told you was true, even truer now than it was before. However, at the time ..." She broke off, chuckling nervously. "It's embarrassing. You see, at first, I was mostly jealous because he wanted you and not me."

Her words sent a thrill of fear through me. Sitting there in the silver light, she was more beautiful than anything else I could imagine. I could not compete with Rosalie.

"But you love Emmett ... ," I mumbled.

She shook her head back and forth, amused. "I don't want Edward that way, Bella. I never did — I love him as a brother, but he's irritated me from the first moment I heard him speak. You have to understand, though ... I was so used to people wanting me. And Edward wasn't the least bit interested. It frustrated me, even offended me in the beginning. But he never wanted anyone, so it didn't bother me long. Even

when we first met Tanya's clan in Denali — all those females! — Edward never showed the slightest preference. And then he met you." She looked at me with confused eyes. I was only half paying attention. I was thinking about Edward and Tanya and all those females, and my lips pressed together in a hard line.

"Not that you aren't pretty, Bella," she said, misreading my expression. "But it just meant that he found you more attractive than me. I'm vain enough that I minded."

"But you said 'at first.' That doesn't still … bother you, does it? I mean, we both know you're the most beautiful person on the planet."

I laughed at having to say the words — it was so obvious. How odd that Rosalie should need such reassurances.

Rosalie laughed, too. "Thanks, Bella. And no, it doesn't really bother me anymore. Edward has always been a little strange." She laughed again.

"But you still don't like me," I whispered.

Her smile faded. "I'm sorry about that."

We sat in silence for a moment, and she didn't seem inclined to go on.

"Would you tell me why? Did I do something … ?" Was she angry that I'd put her family — her Emmett — in danger? Time and time again. James, and now Victoria …

"No, you haven't done anything," she murmured. "Not yet."

I stared at her, perplexed.

"Don't you see, Bella?" Her voice was suddenly more passionate than before, even while she'd told her unhappy story. "You already have everything. You have a whole life ahead of you — everything I want. And you're going to just throw it away. Can't you see that I'd trade everything I have to be you? You have the choice that I didn't have, and you're choosing wrong!"

I flinched back from her fierce expression. I realized my mouth had fallen open and I snapped it shut.

She stared at me for a long moment and, slowly, the fervor in her eyes dimmed. Abruptly, she was abashed.

"And I was so sure that I could do this calmly." She shook her head, seeming a little dazed by the flood of emotion. "It's just that it's harder now than it was then, when it was no more than vanity."

She stared at the moon in silence. It was a few moments before I was brave enough to break into her reverie.

"Would you like me better if I chose to stay human?"

She turned back to me, her lips twitching into a hint of a smile. "Maybe."

"You did get some of your happy ending, though," I reminded her. "You got Emmett."

"I got half." She grinned. "You know that I saved Emmett from a bear that was mauling him, and carried him home to Carlisle. But can you guess why I stopped the bear from eating him?"

I shook my head.

"With the dark curls … the dimples that showed even while he was grimacing in pain … the strange innocence that seemed so out of place on a grown man's face … he reminded me of Vera's little Henry. I didn't want him to die — so much that, even though I hated this life, I was selfish enough to ask Carlisle to change him for me.

"I got luckier than I deserved. Emmett is everything I would have asked for if I'd known myself well enough to know what to ask for. He's exactly the kind of person someone like me needs. And, oddly enough, he needs me, too. That part worked out better than I could have hoped. But there will never be more than the two of us. And I'll never sit on a porch somewhere, with him gray-haired by my side, surrounded by our grandchildren."

Her smile was kind now. "That sounds quite bizarre to you, doesn't it? In some ways, you are much more mature than I was at eighteen. But in other ways … there are many things you've probably never thought about seriously. You're too young to know what you'll want in ten years, fifteen years — and too young to give it all up without thinking it through. You don't want to be rash about permanent things, Bella." She patted my head, but the gesture didn't feel condescending.

I sighed.

"Just think about it a little. Once it's done, it can't be undone. Esme's made do with us as substitutes … and Alice doesn't remember anything human so she can't miss it… . You will remember, though. It's a lot to give up."

But more to get in return, I didn't say aloud. "Thanks, Rosalie. It's nice to understand ... to know you better."

"I apologize for being such a monster." She grinned. "I'll try to behave myself from now on."

I grinned back at her.

We weren't friends yet, but I was pretty sure she wouldn't always hate me so much.

"I'll let you sleep now." Rosalie's eyes flickered to the bed, and her lips twitched. "I know you're frustrated that he's keeping you locked up like this, but don't give him too bad a time when he gets back. He loves you more than you know. It terrifies him to be away from you." She got up silently and ghosted to the door. "Goodnight, Bella," she whispered as she shut it behind herself.

"Goodnight, Rosalie," I murmured a second too late.

It took me a long time to fall asleep after that.

When I did sleep, I had a nightmare. I was crawling across the dark, cold stones of an unfamiliar street, under lightly falling snow, leaving a trail of blood smeared behind me. A shadowy angel in a long white dress watched my progress with resentful eyes.

The next morning, Alice drove me to school while I stared grumpily out the windshield. I was feeling sleep-deprived, and it made the irritation of my imprisonment that much stronger.

"Tonight we'll go out to Olympia or something," she promised. "That would be fun, right?"

"Why don't you just lock me in the basement," I suggested, "and forget the sugar coating?"

Alice frowned. "He's going to take the Porsche back. I'm not doing a very good job. You're supposed to be having fun."

"It's not your fault," I muttered. I couldn't believe I actually felt guilty. "I'll see you at lunch."

I trudged off to English. Without Edward, the day was guaranteed to be unbearable. I sulked through my first class, well aware that my attitude wasn't helping anything.

When the bell rang, I got up without much enthusiasm. Mike was there at the door, holding it open for me.

"Edward hiking this weekend?" he asked sociably as we walked out into the light rain.

"Yeah."

"You want to do something tonight?"

How could he still sound hopeful?

"Can't. I've got a slumber party," I grumbled. He gave me a strange look as he processed my mood.

"Who are you —"

Mike's question was cut short as a loud, growling roar erupted from behind us in the parking lot. Everyone on the sidewalk turned to look, staring in disbelief as the noisy black motorcycle screeched to a stop on the edge of the concrete, the engine still snarling.

Jacob waved to me urgently.

“Run, Bella!” he yelled over the engine’s roar.

I was frozen for a second before I understood.

I looked at Mike quickly. I knew I only had seconds.

How far would Alice go to restrain me in public?

“I got really sick and went home, okay?” I said to Mike, my voice filled with sudden excitement.

“Fine,” he muttered.

I pecked Mike swiftly on the cheek. “Thanks, Mike. I owe you one!” I called as I sprinted away.

Jacob revved his engine, grinning. I jumped on the back of his seat, wrapping my arms tightly around his waist.

I caught sight of Alice, frozen at the edge of the cafeteria, her eyes sparking with fury, her lip curled back over her teeth.

I shot her one pleading glance.

Then we were racing across the blacktop so fast that my stomach got lost somewhere behind me.

“Hold on,” Jacob shouted.

I hid my face in his back as he sped down the highway. I knew he would slow down when we hit the Quileute border. I just had to hold on till then. I prayed silently and fervently that Alice wouldn’t follow, and that Charlie wouldn’t happen to see me… .

It was obvious when we had reached the safe zone. The bike slowed, and Jacob straightened up and howled with laughter. I opened my eyes.

“We made it,” he shouted. “Not bad for a prison break, eh?”

“Good thinking, Jake.”

“I remembered what you said about the psychic leech not being about to predict what I’m going to do. I’m glad you didn’t think of this — she wouldn’t have let you go to school.”

“That’s why I didn’t consider it.”

He laughed triumphantly. “What do you want to do today?”

“Anything!” I laughed back. It felt great to be free.

# Chapter 8

## TEMPER

We ended up on the beach again, wandering aimlessly. Jacob was still full of himself for engineering my escape.

“Do you think they’ll come looking for you?” he asked, sounding hopeful.

“No.” I was certain about that. “They’re going to be furious with me tonight, though.”

He picked up a rock and chucked it into the waves. “Don’t go back, then,” he suggested again.

“Charlie would love that,” I said sarcastically.

“I bet he wouldn’t mind.”

I didn’t answer. Jacob was probably right, and that made me grind my teeth together. Charlie’s blatant preference for my Quileute friends was so unfair. I wondered if he would feel the same if he knew the choice was really between vampires and werewolves.

“So what’s the latest pack scandal?” I asked lightly.

Jacob skidded to a halt, and he stared down at me with shocked eyes.

“What? That was a joke.”

“Oh.” He looked away.

I waited for him to start walking again, but he seemed lost in thought.

"Is there a scandal?" I wondered.

Jacob chuckled once. "I forget what it's like, not having everyone know everything all the time. Having a quiet, private place inside my head."

We walked along the stony beach quietly for a few minutes.

"So what is it?" I finally asked. "That everyone in your head already knows?"

He hesitated for a moment, as if he weren't sure how much he was going to tell me. Then he sighed and said, "Quil imprinted. That's three now. The rest of us are starting to get worried. Maybe it's more common than the stories say… ." He frowned, and then turned to stare at me. He gazed into my eyes without speaking, his eyebrows furrowed in concentration.

"What are you staring at?" I asked, feeling self-conscious.

He sighed. "Nothing."

Jacob started walking again. Without seeming to think about it, he reached out and took my hand. We paced silently across the rocks.

I thought of how we must look walking hand and hand down the beach — like a couple, certainly — and wondered if I should object. But this was the way it had always been with Jacob… . No reason to get worked up about it now.

"Why is Quil's imprinting such a scandal?" I asked when it didn't look like he was going to go on. "Is it because he's the newest one?"

“That doesn’t have anything to do with it.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“It’s another one of those legend things. I wonder when we’re going to stop being surprised that they’re all true?” he muttered to himself.

“Are you going to tell me? Or do I have to guess?”

“You’d never get it right. See, Quil hasn’t been hanging out with us, you know, until just recently. So he hadn’t been around Emily’s place much.”

“Quil imprinted on Emily, too?” I gasped.

“No! I told you not to guess. Emily had her two nieces down for a visit … and Quil met Claire.”

He didn’t continue. I thought about that for a moment.

“Emily doesn’t want her niece with a werewolf? That’s a little hypocritical,” I said.

But I could understand why she of all people might feel that way. I thought again of the long scars that marred her face and extended all the way down her right arm. Sam had lost control just once when he was standing too close to her. Once was all it took… . I’d seen the pain in Sam’s eyes when he looked at what he’d done to Emily. I could understand why Emily might want to protect her niece from that.

“Would you please stop guessing? You’re way off. Emily doesn’t mind that part, it’s just, well, a little early.”

“What do you mean early?”

Jacob appraised me with narrowed eyes. “Try not to be judgmental, okay?”

I nodded cautiously.

“Claire is two,” Jacob told me.

Rain started to fall. I blinked furiously as the drops pelted my face.

Jacob waited in silence. He wore no jacket, as usual; the rain left a spatter of dark spots on his black T-shirt, and dripped through his shaggy hair. His face was expressionless as he watched mine.

“Quil … imprinted … with a two-year-old?” I was finally able to ask.

“It happens.” Jacob shrugged. He bent to grab another rock and sent it flying out into the bay. “Or so the stories say.”

“But she’s a baby,” I protested.

He looked at me with dark amusement. “Quil’s not getting any older,” he reminded me, a bit of acid in his tone. “He’ll just have to be patient for a few decades.”

“I … don’t know what to say.”

I was trying my hardest not to be critical, but, in truth, I was horrified. Until now, nothing about the werewolves had bothered me since the day I’d found out they weren’t committing the murders I’d suspected them of.

“You’re making judgments,” he accused. “I can see it on your face.”

“Sorry,” I muttered. “But it sounds really creepy.”

“It’s not like that; you’ve got it all wrong,” Jacob defended his friend, suddenly vehement. “I’ve seen what it’s like, through his eyes. There’s nothing romantic about it at all, not for Quil, not now.” He took a deep breath, frustrated. “It’s so hard to describe. It’s not like love at first sight, really. It’s more like … gravity moves. When you see her, suddenly it’s not the earth holding you here anymore. She does. And nothing matters more than her. And you would do anything for her, be anything for her… . You become whatever she needs you to be, whether that’s a protector, or a lover, or a friend, or a brother.

“Quil will be the best, kindest big brother any kid ever had. There isn’t a toddler on the planet that will be more carefully looked after than that little girl will be. And then, when she’s older and needs a friend, he’ll be more understanding, trustworthy, and reliable than anyone else she knows. And then, when she’s grown up, they’ll be as happy as Emily and Sam.” A strange, bitter edge sharpened his tone at the very end, when he spoke of Sam.

“Doesn’t Claire get a choice here?”

“Of course. But why wouldn’t she choose him, in the end? He’ll be her perfect match. Like he was designed for her alone.”

We walked in silence for a moment, till I paused to toss a rock toward the ocean. It fell to the beach several meters short. Jacob laughed at me.

“We can’t all be freakishly strong,” I muttered.

He sighed.

"When do you think it will happen for you?" I asked quietly.

His answer was flat and immediate. "Never."

"It's not something you can control, is it?"

He was silent for a few minutes. Unconsciously, we both walked slower, barely moving at all.

"It's not supposed to be," he admitted. "But you have to see her — the one that's supposedly meant for you."

"And you think that if you haven't seen her yet, then she's not out there?" I asked skeptically. "Jacob, you haven't really seen much of the world — less than me, even."

"No, I haven't," he said in a low voice. He looked at my face with suddenly piercing eyes. "But I'll never see anyone else, Bella. I only see you. Even when I close my eyes and try to see something else. Ask Quil or Embry. It drives them all crazy."

I dropped my eyes to the rocks.

We weren't walking anymore. The only sound was of the waves beating against the shore. I couldn't hear the rain over their roar.

"Maybe I'd better go home," I whispered.

"No!" he protested, surprised by this conclusion.

I looked up at him again, and his eyes were anxious now.

"You have the whole day off, right? The bloodsucker won't be home yet."

I glared at him.

"No offense intended," he said quickly.

"Yes, I have the whole day. But, Jake ..."

He held up his hands. "Sorry," he apologized. "I won't be like that anymore. I'll just be Jacob."

I sighed. "But if that's what you're thinking ..."

"Don't worry about me," he insisted, smiling with deliberate cheer, too brightly. "I know what I'm doing. Just tell me if I'm upsetting you."

"I don't know... ."

"C'mon, Bella. Let's go back to the house and get our bikes. You've got to ride a motorcycle regularly to keep it in tune."

"I really don't think I'm allowed."

"By who? Charlie or the blood — or him?"

"Both."

Jacob grinned my grin, and he was suddenly the Jacob I missed the most, sunny and warm.

I couldn't help grinning back.

The rain softened, turned to mist.

"I won't tell anyone," he promised.

“Except every one of your friends.”

He shook his head soberly and raised his right hand. “I promise not to think about it.”

I laughed. “If I get hurt, it was because I tripped.”

“Whatever you say.”

We rode our motorcycles on the back roads around La Push until the rain made them too muddy and Jacob insisted that he was going to pass out if he didn’t eat soon. Billy greeted me easily when we got to the house, as if my sudden reappearance meant nothing more complicated than that I’d wanted to spend the day with my friend. After we ate the sandwiches Jacob made, we went out to the garage and I helped him clean up the bikes. I hadn’t been here in months — since Edward had returned — but there was no sense of import to it. It was just another afternoon in the garage.

“This is nice,” I commented when he pulled the warm sodas from the grocery bag. “I’ve missed this place.”

He smiled, looking around at the plastic sheds bolted together over our heads. “Yeah, I can understand that. All the splendor of the Taj Mahal, without the inconvenience and expense of traveling to India.”

“To Washington’s little Taj Mahal,” I toasted, holding up my can.

He touched his can to mine.

“Do you remember last Valentine’s Day? I think that was the last time you were here — the last time when things were still … normal, I mean.”

I laughed. “Of course I remember. I traded a lifetime of servitude for a box of conversation hearts. That’s not something I’m likely to forget.”

He laughed with me. “That’s right. Hmm, servitude. I’ll have to think of something good.” Then he sighed. “It feels like it was years ago. Another era. A happier one.”

I couldn’t agree with him. This was my happy era now. But I was surprised to realize how many things I missed from my own personal dark ages. I stared through the opening at the murky forest. The rain had picked up again, but it was warm in the little garage, sitting next to Jacob. He was as good as a furnace.

His fingers brushed my hand. “Things have really changed.”

“Yeah,” I said, and then I reached out and patted the back tire of my bike. “Charlie used to like me. I hope Billy doesn’t say anything about today… .” I bit my lip.

“He won’t. He doesn’t get worked up about things the way Charlie does. Hey, I never did apologize officially for that stupid move with the bike. I’m real sorry about ratting you out to Charlie. I wish I hadn’t.”

I rolled my eyes. “Me, too.”

“I’m really, really sorry.”

He looked at me hopefully, his wet, tangled black hair sticking up in every direction around his pleading face.

“Oh, fine! You’re forgiven.”

"Thanks, Bells!"

We grinned at each other for a second, and then his face clouded over.

"You know that day, when I brought the bike over … I've been wanting to ask you something," he said slowly. "But also … not wanting to."

I held very still — a reaction to stress. It was a habit I'd picked up from Edward.

"Were you just being stubborn because you were mad at me, or were you really serious?" he whispered.

"About what?" I whispered back, though I was sure I knew what he meant.

He glared at me. "You know. When you said it was none of my business … if — if he bit you." He cringed visibly at the end.

"Jake …" My throat felt swollen. I couldn't finish.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Were you serious?"

He was trembling just slightly. His eyes stayed closed.

"Yes," I whispered.

Jacob inhaled, slow and deep. "I guess I knew that."

I stared at his face, waiting for his eyes to open.

"You know what this will mean?" He demanded suddenly. "You do understand that, don't you? What will happen if they break the treaty?"

“We’ll leave first,” I said in a small voice.

His eyes flashed open, their black depths full of anger and pain. “There wasn’t a geographic limit to the treaty, Bella. Our great-grandfathers only agreed to keep the peace because the Cullens swore that they were different, that humans weren’t in danger from them. They promised they would never kill or change anyone ever again. If they go back on their word, the treaty is meaningless, and they are no different than any other vampires. Once that’s established, when we find them again —”

“But, Jake, didn’t you break the treaty already?” I asked, grasping at straws. “Wasn’t part of it that you not tell people about the vampires? And you told me. So isn’t the treaty sort of moot, anyhow?”

Jacob didn’t like the reminder; the pain in his eyes hardened into animosity. “Yeah, I broke the treaty — back before I believed any of it. And I’m sure they were informed of that.” He glared sourly at my forehead, not meeting my shamed gaze. “But it’s not like that gives them a freebie or anything. There’s no fault for a fault. They have only one option if they object to what I did. The same option we’ll have when they break the treaty: to attack. To start the war.”

He made it sound so inevitable. I shuddered.

“Jake, it doesn’t have to be that way.”

His teeth ground together. “It is that way.”

The silence after his declaration felt very loud.

“Will you never forgive me, Jacob?” I whispered. As soon as I said the words, I wished I hadn’t. I didn’t want to hear his answer.

"You won't be Bella anymore," he told me. "My friend won't exist. There'll be no one to forgive."

"That sounds like a no," I whispered.

We faced each other for an endless moment.

"Is this goodbye then, Jake?"

He blinked rapidly, his fierce expression melting in surprise. "Why? We still have a few years. Can't we be friends until we're out of time?"

"Years? No, Jake, not years." I shook my head, and laughed once without humor. "Weeks is more accurate."

I was not expecting his reaction.

He was suddenly on his feet, and there was a loud pop as the soda can exploded in his hand. Soda flew everywhere, soaking me, like it was spraying from a hose.

"Jake!" I started to complain, but I fell silent when I realized that his whole body was quivering with anger. He glared at me wildly, a growling sound building in his chest.

I froze in place, too shocked to remember how to move.

The shaking rolled through him, getting faster, until it looked like he was vibrating. His shape blurred… .

And then Jacob gritted his teeth together, and the growling stopped. He squeezed his eyes tight in concentration; the quivering slowed until only his hands were shaking.

"Weeks," Jacob said in a flat monotone.

I couldn't respond; I was still frozen.

He opened his eyes. They were beyond fury now.

"He's going to change you into a filthy bloodsucker in just a few weeks!" Jacob hissed through his teeth.

Too stunned to take offense at his words, I just nodded mutely.

His face turned green under the russet skin.

"Of course, Jake," I whispered after a long minute of silence. "He's seventeen, Jacob. And I get closer to nineteen every day. Besides, what's the point in waiting? He's all I want. What else can I do?"

I'd meant that as a rhetorical question.

His words cracked like snaps of a whip. "Anything. Anything else. You'd be better off dead. I'd rather you were."

I recoiled like he'd slapped me. It hurt worse than if he had.

And then, as the pain shot through me, my own temper burst into flame.

"Maybe you'll get lucky," I said bleakly, lurching to my feet. "Maybe I'll get hit by a truck on my way back."

I grabbed my motorcycle and pushed it out into the rain. He didn't move as I passed him. As soon as I was on the small, muddy path, I climbed on and kicked the bike to life. The rear tire spit a fountain of mud toward the garage, and I hoped that it hit him.

I got absolutely soaked as I sped across the slick highway toward the Cullens' house. The wind felt like it was freezing the rain against my skin, and my teeth were chattering before I was halfway there.

Motorcycles were too impractical for Washington. I would sell the stupid thing first chance I got.

I walked the bike into the Cullens' cavernous garage and was unsurprised to find Alice waiting for me, perched lightly on the hood of her Porsche. Alice stroked the glossy yellow paint.

"I haven't even had a chance to drive it." She sighed.

"Sorry," I spit through my rattling teeth.

"You look like you could use a hot shower," she said, offhand, as she sprang lightly to her feet.

"Yep."

She pursed her lips, taking in my expression carefully. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Nope."

She nodded in assent, but her eyes were raging with curiosity.

"Do you want to go to Olympia tonight?"

"Not really. Can't I go home?"

She grimaced.

"Never mind, Alice," I said. "I'll stay if it makes things easier for you."

“Thanks,” she sighed in relief.

I went to bed early that night, curling up on his sofa again.

It was still dark when I woke. I was groggy, but I knew it wasn’t near morning yet. My eyes closed, and I stretched, rolling over. It took me a second before I realized that the movement should have dumped me onto the floor. And that I was much too comfortable.

I rolled back over, trying to see. It was darker than last night — the clouds were too thick for the moon to shine through.

“Sorry,” he murmured so softly that his voice was part of the darkness. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

I tensed, waiting for the fury — both his and mine — but it was only quiet and calm in the darkness of his room. I could almost taste the sweetness of reunion in the air, a separate fragrance from the perfume of his breath; the emptiness when we were apart left its own bitter aftertaste, something I didn’t consciously notice until it was removed.

There was no friction in the space between us. The stillness was peaceful — not like the calm before the tempest, but like a clear night untouched by even the dream of a storm.

And I didn’t care that I was supposed to be angry with him. I didn’t care that I was supposed to be angry with everyone. I reached out for him, found his hands in the darkness, and pulled myself closer to him. His arms encircled me, cradling me to his chest. My lips searched, hunting along his throat, to his chin, till I finally found his lips.

Edward kissed me softly for a moment, and then he chuckled.

“I was all braced for the wrath that was going to put grizzlies to shame, and this is what I get? I should infuriate you more often.”

“Give me a minute to work up to it,” I teased, kissing him again.

“I’ll wait as long as you want,” he whispered against my lips. His fingers knotted in my hair.

My breath was becoming uneven. “Maybe in the morning.”

“Whatever you prefer.”

“Welcome home,” I said while his cold lips pressed under my jaw. “I’m glad you came back.”

“That’s a very good thing.”

“Mmm,” I agreed, tightening my arms around his neck.

His hand curved around my elbow, moving slowly down my arm, across my ribs and over my waist, tracing along my hip and down my leg, around my knee. He paused there, his hand curling around my calf. He pulled my leg up suddenly, hitching it around his hip.

I stopped breathing. This wasn’t the kind of thing he usually allowed. Despite his cold hands, I felt suddenly warm. His lips moved in the hollow at the base of my throat.

“Not to bring on the ire prematurely,” he whispered, “but do you mind telling me what it is about this bed that you object to?”

Before I could answer, before I could even concentrate enough to make sense of his words, he rolled to the side, pulling me on top of him. He held my face in his hands, angling it up so that his mouth could reach my throat. My breathing was too loud — it was almost embarrassing, but I couldn’t care quite enough to be ashamed.

“The bed?” he asked again. “I think it’s nice.”

“It’s unnecessary,” I managed to gasp.

He pulled my face back to his, and my lips shaped themselves around his. Slowly this time, he rolled till he hovered over me. He held himself carefully so that I felt none of his weight, but I could feel the cool marble of his body press against mine. My heart was hammering so loudly that it was hard to hear his quiet laughter.

“That’s debatable,” he disagreed. “This would be difficult on a couch.”

Cold as ice, his tongue lightly traced the shape of my lips.

My head was spinning — the air was coming too fast and shallow.

“Did you change your mind?” I asked breathlessly. Maybe he’d rethought all his careful rules. Maybe there was more significance to this bed than I’d originally guessed. My heart pounded almost painfully as I waited for his answer.

Edward sighed, rolling back so that we were on our sides again.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Bella,” he said, disapproval strong in his voice — clearly, he understood what I meant. “I was just trying to illustrate the benefits of the bed you don’t seem to like. Don’t get carried away.”

“Too late,” I muttered. “And I like the bed,” I added.

“Good.” I could hear the smile in his voice as he kissed my forehead. “I do, too.”

“But I still think it’s unnecessary,” I continued. “If we’re not going to get carried away, what’s the point?”

He sighed again. “For the hundredth time, Bella — it’s too dangerous.”

“I like danger,” I insisted.

“I know.” There was a sour edge to his voice, and I realized that he would have seen the motorcycle in the garage.

“I’ll tell you what’s dangerous,” I said quickly, before he could move to a new topic of discussion. “I’m going to spontaneously combust one of these days — and you’ll have no one but yourself to blame.”

He started to push me away.

“What are you doing?” I objected, clinging to him.

“Protecting you from combustion. If this too much for you… .”

“I can handle it,” I insisted.

He let me worm myself back into the circle of his arms.

“I’m sorry I gave you the wrong impression,” he said. “I didn’t mean to make you unhappy. That wasn’t nice.”

“Actually, it was very, very nice.”

He took a deep breath. “Aren’t you tired? I should let you sleep.”

“No, I’m not. I don’t mind if you want to give me the wrong impression again.”

“That’s probably a bad idea. You’re not the only one who gets carried away.”

“Yes, I am,” I grumbled.

He chuckled. “You have no idea, Bella. It doesn’t help that you are so eager to undermine my self-control, either.”

“I’m not going to apologize for that.”

“Can I apologize?”

“For what?”

“You were angry with me, remember?”

“Oh, that.”

“I’m sorry. I was wrong. It’s much easier to have the proper perspective when I have you safely here.” His arms tightened around me. “I go a little berserk when I try to leave you. I don’t think I’ll go so far again. It’s not worth it.”

I smiled. “Didn’t you find any mountain lions?”

“Yes, I did, actually. Still not worth the anxiety. I’m sorry I had Alice hold you hostage, though. That was a bad idea.”

“Yes,” I agreed.

“I won’t do it again.”

“Okay,” I said easily. He was already forgiven. “But slumber parties do have their advantages... .” I curled myself closer to him, pressing my lips into the indentation over his collarbone. “You can hold me hostage any time you want.”

“Mmm,” he sighed. “I may take you up on that.”

“So is it my turn now?”

“Your turn?” his voice was confused.

“To apologize.”

“What do you have to apologize for?”

“Aren’t you mad at me?” I asked blankly.

“No.”

It sounded like he really meant it.

I felt my eyebrows pull together. “Didn’t you see Alice when you got home?”

“Yes — why?”

“Are you going to take her Porsche back?”

“Of course not. It was a gift.”

I wished I could see his expression. His voice sounded as if I’d insulted him.

“Don’t you want to know what I did?” I asked, starting to be puzzled by his apparent lack of concern.

I felt him shrug. “I’m always interested in everything you do — but you don’t have to tell me unless you want to.”

“But I went to La Push.”

“I know.”

“And I ditched school.”

“So did I.”

I stared toward the sound of his voice, tracing his features with my fingers, trying to understand his mood. “Where did all this tolerance come from?” I demanded.

He sighed.

“I decided that you were right. My problem before was more about my … prejudice against werewolves than anything else. I’m going to try to be more reasonable and trust your judgment. If you say it’s safe, then I’ll believe you.”

“Wow.”

“And … most importantly … I’m not willing to let this drive a wedge between us.”

I rested my head against his chest and closed my eyes, totally content.

“So,” he murmured in a casual tone. “Did you make plans to go back to La Push again soon?”

I didn’t answer. His question brought back the memory of Jacob’s words, and my throat was suddenly tight.

He misread my silence and the tension in my body.

“Just so that I can make my own plans,” he explained quickly. “I don’t want you to feel like you have to hurry back because I’m sitting around waiting for you.”

“No,” I said in a voice that sounded strange to me. “I don’t have plans go back.”

“Oh. You don’t have to do that for me.”

“I don’t think I’m welcome anymore,” I whispered.

“Did you run over someone’s cat?” he asked lightly. I knew he didn’t want to force the story out of me, but I could hear the curiosity burning behind his words.

“No.” I took a deep breath, and then mumbled quickly through the explanation. “I thought Jacob would have realized … I didn’t think it would surprise him.”

Edward waited while I hesitated.

“He wasn’t expecting … that it was so soon.”

“Ah,” Edward said quietly.

"He said he'd rather see me dead." My voice broke on the last word.

Edward was too still for a moment, controlling whatever reaction he didn't want me to see.

Then he crushed me gently to his chest. "I'm so sorry."

"I thought you'd be glad," I whispered.

"Glad over something that's hurt you?" he murmured into my hair. "I don't think so, Bella."

I sighed and relaxed, fitting myself to the stone shape of him. But he was motionless again, tense.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"It's nothing."

"You can tell me."

He paused for a minute. "It might make you angry."

"I still want to know."

He sighed. "I could quite literally kill him for saying that to you. I want to."

I laughed halfheartedly. "I guess it's a good thing you've got so much self-control."

"I could slip." His tone was thoughtful.

"If you're going to have a lapse in control, I can think of a better place for it." I reached for his face, trying to pull myself up to kiss him. His arms held me tighter, restraining.

He sighed. “Must I always be the responsible one?”

I grinned in the darkness. “No. Let me be in charge of responsibility for a few minutes … or hours.”

“Goodnight, Bella.”

“Wait — there was something else I wanted to ask you about.”

“What’s that?”

“I was talking to Rosalie last night… .”

His body tensed again. “Yes. She was thinking about that when I got in. She gave you quite a lot to consider, didn’t she?”

His voice was anxious, and I realized that he thought I wanted to talk about the reasons Rosalie’d given me for staying human. But I was interested in something much more pressing.

“She told me a little bit … about the time your family lived in Denali.”

There was a short pause; this beginning took him by surprise. “Yes?”

“She mentioned something about a bunch of female vampires … and you.”

He didn’t answer, though I waited for a long moment.

“Don’t worry,” I said, after the silence had grown uncomfortable. “She told me you didn’t … show any preference. But I was just wondering, you know, if any of them had. Shown a preference for you, I mean.”

Again he said nothing.

“Which one?” I asked, trying to keep my voice casual, and not quite managing. “Or was there more than one?”

No answer. I wished I could see his face, so I could try to guess what this silence meant.

“Alice will tell me,” I said. “I’ll go ask her right now.”

His arms tightened; I was unable to squirm even an inch away.

“It’s late,” he said. His voice had a little edge to it that was something new. Sort of nervous, maybe a little embarrassed. “Besides, I think Alice stepped out… .”

“It’s bad,” I guessed. “It’s really bad, isn’t it?” I started to panic, my heart accelerating as I imagined the gorgeous immortal rival I’d never realized I had.

“Calm down, Bella,” he said, kissing the tip of my nose. “You’re being absurd.”

“Am I? Then why won’t you tell me?”

“Because there’s nothing to tell. You’re blowing this wildly out of proportion.”

“Which one?” I insisted.

He sighed. “Tanya expressed a little interest. I let her know, in a very courteous, gentlemanly fashion, that I did not return that interest. End of story.”

I kept my voice as even as possible. “Tell me something — what does Tanya look like?”

“Just like the rest of us — white skin, gold eyes,” he answered too quickly.

“And, of course, extraordinarily beautiful.”

I felt him shrug.

“I suppose, to human eyes,” he said, indifferent. “You know what, though?”

“What?” My voice was petulant.

He put his lips right to my ear; his cold breath tickled. “I prefer brunettes.”

“She’s a blonde. That figures.”

“Strawberry blonde — not at all my type.”

I thought about that for a while, trying to concentrate as his lips moved slowly along my cheek, down my throat, and back up again. He made the circuit three times before I spoke.

“I guess that’s okay, then,” I decided.

“Hmm,” he whispered against my skin. “You’re quite adorable when you’re jealous. It’s surprisingly enjoyable.”

I scowled into the darkness.

“It’s late,” he said again, murmuring, almost crooning now, his voice smoother than silk. “Sleep, my Bella. Dream happy dreams. You are the only one who has ever touched my heart. It will always be yours. Sleep, my only love.”

He started to hum my lullaby, and I knew it was only a matter of time till I succumbed, so I closed my eyes and snuggled closer into his chest.

# Chapter 9

## TARGET

Alice dropped me off in the morning, in keeping with the slumber party charade. It wouldn't be long until Edward showed up, officially returning from his "hiking" trip. All of the pretenses were starting to wear on me. I wouldn't miss this part of being human.

Charlie peeked through the front window when he heard me slam the car door. He waved to Alice, and then went to get the door for me.

"Did you have fun?" Charlie asked.

"Sure, it was great. Very ... girlie."

I carried my stuff in, dumped it all at the foot of the stairs, and wandered into the kitchen to look for a snack.

"You've got a message," Charlie called after me.

On the kitchen counter, the phone message pad was propped up conspicuously against a saucepan.

Jacob called, Charlie had written.

He said he didn't mean it, and that he's sorry. He wants you to call him. Be nice and give him a break. He sounded upset.

I grimaced. Charlie didn't usually editorialize on my messages.

Jacob could just go ahead and be upset. I didn't want to talk to him. Last I'd heard, they weren't big on

allowing phone calls from the other side. If Jacob preferred me dead, then maybe he should get used to the silence.

My appetite evaporated. I turned an about face and went to put my things away.

“Aren’t you going to call Jacob?” Charlie asked. He was leaning around the living room wall, watching me pick up.

“No.”

I started up the stairs.

“That’s not very attractive behavior, Bella,” he said. “Forgiveness is divine.”

“Mind your own business,” I muttered under my breath, much too low for him to hear.

I knew the laundry was building up, so after I put my toothpaste away and threw my dirty clothes in the hamper, I went to strip Charlie’s bed. I left his sheets in a pile at the top of the stairs and went to get mine.

I paused beside the bed, cocking my head to the side.

Where was my pillow? I turned in a circle, scanning the room. No pillow. I noticed that my room looked oddly tidy. Hadn’t my gray sweatshirt been draped over the low bedpost on the footboard? And I would swear there had been a pair of dirty socks behind the rocking chair, along with the red blouse I’d tried on two mornings ago, but decided was too dressy for school, hanging over the arm… . I spun around again. My hamper wasn’t empty, but it wasn’t overflowing, the way I thought it had been.

Was Charlie doing laundry? That was out of character.

“Dad, did you start the wash?” I shouted out my door.

“Um, no,” he shouted back, sounding guilty. “Did you want me to?”

“No, I got it. Were you looking for something in my room?”

“No. Why?”

“I can’t find ... a shirt... .”

“I haven’t been in there.”

And then I remembered that Alice had been here to get my pajamas. I hadn’t noticed that she’d borrowed my pillow, too — probably since I’d avoided the bed. It looked like she had cleaned while she was passing through. I blushed for my slovenly ways.

But that red shirt really wasn’t dirty, so I went to save it from the hamper.

I expected to find it near the top, but it wasn’t there. I dug through the whole pile and still couldn’t find it. I knew I was probably getting paranoid, but it seemed like something else was missing, or maybe more than one something. I didn’t even have half a load here.

I ripped my sheets off and headed for the laundry closet, grabbing Charlie’s on the way. The washing machine was empty. I checked the dryer, too, half-expecting to find a washed load waiting for me, courtesy of Alice. Nothing. I frowned, mystified.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Charlie yelled.

"Not yet."

I went back upstairs to search under my bed. Nothing but dust bunnies. I started to dig through my dresser. Maybe I'd put the red shirt away and forgotten.

I gave up when the doorbell rang. That would be Edward.

"Door," Charlie informed me from the couch as I skipped past him.

"Don't strain yourself, Dad."

I pulled the door open with a big smile on my face.

Edward's golden eyes were wide, his nostrils flared, his lips pulled back over his teeth.

"Edward?" My voice was sharp with shock as I read his expression. "What —?"

He put his finger to my lips. "Give me two seconds," he whispered. "Don't move."

I stood frozen on the doorstep and he … disappeared. He moved so quickly that Charlie wouldn't even have seen him pass.

Before I could compose myself enough to count to two, he was back. He put his arm around my waist and pulled me swiftly toward the kitchen. His eyes darted around the room, and he held me against his body as if he were shielding me from something. I threw a glance toward Charlie on the couch, but he was studiously ignoring us.

“Someone’s been here,” he murmured in my ear after he pulled me to the back of the kitchen. His voice was strained; it was difficult to hear him over the thumping of the washing machine.

“I swear that no werewolves —” I started to say.

“Not one of them,” he interrupted me quickly, shaking his head. “One of us.”

His tone made it clear that he didn’t mean a member of his family.

I felt the blood empty from my face.

“Victoria?” I choked.

“It’s not a scent I recognize.”

“One of the Volturi,” I guessed.

“Probably.”

“When?”

“That’s why I think it must have been them — it wasn’t long ago, early this morning while Charlie was sleeping. And whoever it was didn’t touch him, so there must have been another purpose.”

“Looking for me.”

He didn’t answer. His body was frozen, a statue.

“What are you two hissing about in here?” Charlie asked suspiciously, rounding the corner with an empty popcorn bowl in his hands.

I felt green. A vampire had been in the house looking for me while Charlie slept. Panic overwhelmed me, closed my throat. I couldn't answer, I just stared at him in horror.

Charlie's expression changed. Abruptly, he was grinning. "If you two are having a fight ... well, don't let me interrupt."

Still grinning, he put his bowl in the sink and sauntered out of the room.

"Let's go," Edward said in a low hard voice.

"But Charlie!" The fear was squeezing my chest, making it hard to breathe.

He deliberated for a short second, and then his phone was in his hand.

"Emmett," he muttered into the receiver. He began talking so fast that I couldn't understand the words. It was over in half a minute. He started pulling me toward the door.

"Emmett and Jasper are on their way," he whispered when he felt my resistance. "They'll sweep the woods. Charlie is fine."

I let him drag me along then, too panicked to think clearly. Charlie met my frightened eyes with a smug grin, which suddenly turned to confusion. Edward had me out the door before Charlie could say anything.

"Where are we going?" I couldn't stop whispering, even after we were in the car.

"We're going to talk to Alice," he told me, his volume normal but his voice bleak.

"You think maybe she saw something?"

He stared at the road through narrowed eyes. "Maybe."

They were waiting for us, on alert after Edward's call. It was like walking into a museum, everyone still as statues in various poses of stress.

"What happened?" Edward demanded as soon as we were through the door. I was shocked to see that he was glowering at Alice, his hands fisted in anger.

Alice stood with her arms folded tight across her chest. Only her lips moved. "I have no idea. I didn't see anything."

"How is that possible?" he hissed.

"Edward," I said, a quiet reproof. I didn't like him talking to Alice this way.

Carlisle interrupted in a calming voice. "It's not an exact science, Edward."

"He was in her room, Alice. He could have still been there — waiting for her."

"I would have seen that."

Edward threw his hands up in exasperation. "Really? You're sure?"

Alice's voice was cold when she answered. "You've already got me watching the Volturis' decisions, watching for Victoria's return, watching Bella's every

step. You want to add another? Do I just have to watch Charlie, or Bella's room, or the house, or the whole street, too? Edward, if I try to do too much, things are going to start slipping through the cracks."

"It looks like they already are," Edward snapped.

"She was never in any danger. There was nothing to see."

"If you're watching Italy, why didn't you see them send —"

"I don't think it's them," Alice insisted. "I would have seen that."

"Who else would leave Charlie alive?"

I shuddered.

"I don't know," Alice said.

"Helpful."

"Stop it, Edward," I whispered.

He turned on me, his face still livid, his teeth clenched together. He glared at me for half a second, and then, suddenly, he exhaled. His eyes widened and his jaw relaxed.

"You're right, Bella. I'm sorry." He looked at Alice. "Forgive me, Alice. I shouldn't be taking this out on you. That was inexcusable."

"I understand," Alice assured him. "I'm not happy about it, either."

Edward took a deep breath. "Okay, let's look at this logically. What are the possibilities?"

Everyone seemed to thaw out at once. Alice relaxed and leaned against the back of the couch. Carlisle walked slowly toward her, his eyes far away. Esme sat on the sofa in front of Alice, curling her legs up on the seat. Only Rosalie remained unmoving, her back to us, staring out the glass wall.

Edward pulled me to the sofa and I sat next to Esme, who shifted to put her arm around me. He held one of my hands tightly in both of his.

"Victoria?" Carlisle asked.

Edward shook his head. "No. I didn't know the scent. He might have been from the Volturi, someone I've never met... ."

Alice shook her head. "Aro hasn't asked anyone to look for her yet. I will see that. I'm waiting for it."

Edward's head snapped up. "You're watching for an official command."

"You think someone's acting on their own? Why?"

"Caius's idea," Edward suggested, his face tightening again.

"Or Jane's ... ," Alice said. "They both have the resources to send an unfamiliar face... ."

Edward scowled. "And the motivation."

"It doesn't make sense, though," Esme said. "If whoever it was meant to wait for Bella, Alice would

have seen that. He — or she — had no intention of hurting Bella. Or Charlie, for that matter."

I cringed at my father's name.

"It's going to be fine, Bella," Esme murmured, smoothing my hair.

"But what was the point then?" Carlisle mused.

"Checking to see if I'm still human?" I guessed.

"Possible," Carlisle said.

Rosalie breathed out a sigh, loud enough for me to hear. She'd unfrozen, and her face was turned expectantly toward the kitchen. Edward, on the other hand, looked discouraged.

Emmett burst through the kitchen door, Jasper right behind him.

"Long gone, hours ago," Emmett announced, disappointed. "The trail went East, then South, and disappeared on a side road. Had a car waiting."

"That's bad luck," Edward muttered. "If he'd gone west ... well, it would be nice for those dogs to make themselves useful."

I winced, and Esme rubbed my shoulder.

Jasper looked at Carlisle. "Neither of us recognized him. But here." He held out something green and crumpled. Carlisle took it from him and held it to his face. I saw, as it exchanged hands, that it was a broken fern frond. "Maybe you know the scent."

"No," Carlisle said. "Not familiar. No one I've ever met."

"Perhaps we're looking at this the wrong way. Maybe it's a coincidence … ," Esme began, but stopped when she saw everyone else's incredulous expressions. "I don't mean a coincidence that a stranger happened to pick Bella's house to visit at random. I meant that maybe someone was just curious. Our scent is all around her. Was he wondering what draws us there?"

"Why wouldn't he just come here then? If he was curious?" Emmett demanded.

"You would," Esme said with a sudden, fond smile. "The rest of us aren't always so direct. Our family is very large — he or she might be frightened. But Charlie wasn't harmed. This doesn't have to be an enemy."

Just curious. Like James and Victoria had been curious, in the beginning? The thought of Victoria made me tremble, though the one thing they seemed certain of was that it had not been her. Not this time. She would stick to her obsessed pattern. This was just someone else, a stranger.

I was slowly realizing that vampires were much bigger participants in this world than I'd once thought. How many times did the average human cross paths with them, completely unaware? How many deaths, obliviously reported as crimes and accidents, were really due to their thirst? How crowded would this new world be when I finally joined it?

The shrouded future sent a shiver down my spine.

The Cullens pondered Esme's words with varying expressions. I could see that Edward did not accept her theory, and that Carlisle very much wanted to.

Alice pursed her lips. "I don't think so. The timing of it was too perfect… . This visitor was so careful to make no contact. Almost like he or she knew that I would see… ."

"He could have other reasons for not making contact," Esme reminded her.

"Does it really matter who it was?" I asked. "Just the chance that someone was looking for me … isn't that reason enough? We shouldn't wait for graduation."

"No, Bella," Edward said quickly. "It's not that bad. If you're really in danger, we'll know."

"Think of Charlie," Carlisle reminded me. "Think of how it would hurt him if you disappeared."

"I am thinking of Charlie! He's the one I'm worried about! What if my little guest had happened to be thirsty last night? As long as I'm around Charlie, he's a target, too. If anything happened to him, it would be all my fault!"

"Hardly, Bella," Esme said, patting my hair again. "And nothing will happen to Charlie. We're just going to have to be more careful."

"More careful?" I repeated in disbelief.

"It's all going to be fine, Bella," Alice promised; Edward squeezed my hand.

And I could see, looking at all of their beautiful faces one by one, that nothing I could say was going to change their minds.

It was a quiet ride home. I was frustrated. Against my better judgment, I was still human.

“You won’t be alone for a second,” Edward promised as he drove me to Charlie’s. “Someone will always be there. Emmett, Alice, Jasper ...”

I sighed. “This is ridiculous. They’ll get so bored, they’ll have to kill me themselves, just for something to do.”

Edward gave me a sour look. “Hilarious, Bella.”

Charlie was in a good mood when we got back. He could see the tension between me and Edward, and he was misinterpreting it. He watched me throw together his dinner with a smug smile on his face. Edward had excused himself for a moment, to do some surveillance, I assumed, but Charlie waited till he was back to pass on my messages.

“Jacob called again,” Charlie said as soon as Edward was in the room. I kept my face empty as I set the plate in front of him.

“Is that a fact?”

Charlie frowned. “Don’t be petty, Bella. He sounded really low.”

“Is Jacob paying you for all the P.R., or are you a volunteer?”

Charlie grumbled incoherently at me until the food cut off his garbled complaint.

Though he didn't realize it, he'd found his mark.

My life was feeling a lot like a game of dice right now — would the next roll come up snake eyes? What if something did happen to me? It seemed worse than petty to leave Jacob feeling guilty about what he'd said.

But I didn't want to talk to him with Charlie around, to have to watch my every word so I didn't let the wrong thing slip. Thinking about this made me jealous of Jacob and Billy's relationship. How easy it must be when you had no secrets from the person you lived with.

So I would wait for the morning. I most likely wasn't going to die tonight, after all, and it wouldn't hurt him to feel guilty for twelve more hours. It might even be good for him.

When Edward officially left for the evening, I wondered who was out in the downpour, keeping an eye on Charlie and me. I felt awful for Alice or whoever else it might be, but still comforted. I had to admit it was nice, knowing I wasn't alone. And Edward was back in record time.

He sang me to sleep again and — aware even in unconsciousness that he was there — I slept free of nightmares.

In the morning, Charlie left to go fishing with Deputy Mark before I was up. I decided to use this lack of supervision to be divine.

"I'm going to let Jacob off the hook," I warned Edward after I'd eaten breakfast.

"I knew you'd forgive him," he said with an easy smile. "Holding grudges is not one of your many talents."

I rolled my eyes, but I was pleased. It seemed like Edward really was over the whole anti-werewolf thing.

I didn't look at the clock until after I'd dialed. It was a little early for calls, and I worried that I would wake Billy and Jake, but someone picked up before the second ring, so he couldn't have been too far from the phone.

"Hello?" a dull voice said.

"Jacob?"

"Bella!" he exclaimed. "Oh, Bella, I'm so sorry!" he tripped over the words as he hurried to get them out. "I swear I didn't mean it. I was just being stupid. I was angry — but that's no excuse. It was the stupidest thing I've ever said in my life and I'm sorry. Don't be mad at me, please? Please. Lifetime of servitude up for grabs — all you have to do is forgive me."

"I'm not mad. You're forgiven."

"Thank you," he breathed fervently. "I can't believe I was such a jerk."

"Don't worry about that — I'm used to it."

He laughed, exuberant with relief. "Come down to see me," he begged. "I want to make it up to you."

I frowned. "How?"

"Anything you want. Cliff diving," he suggested, laughing again.

"Oh, there's a brilliant idea."

"I'll keep you safe," he promised. "No matter what you want to do."

I glanced at Edward. His face was very calm, but I was sure this was not the time.

"Not right now."

"He's not thrilled with me, is he?" Jacob's voice was ashamed, rather than bitter, for once.

"That's not the problem. There's … well, there's this other problem that's slightly more worrisome than a bratty teenage werewolf… ." I tried to keep my tone joking, but I didn't fool him.

"What's wrong?" he demanded.

"Um." I wasn't sure what I should tell him.

Edward held his hand out for the phone. I looked at his face carefully. He seemed calm enough.

"Bella?" Jacob asked.

Edward sighed, holding his hand closer.

"Do you mind speaking to Edward?" I asked apprehensively. "He wants to talk to you."

There was a long pause.

"Okay," Jacob finally agreed. "This should be interesting."

I handed the phone to Edward; I hoped he could read the warning in my eyes.

“Hello, Jacob,” Edward said, perfectly polite.

There was a silence. I bit my lip, trying to guess how Jacob would answer.

“Someone was here — not a scent I know,” Edward explained. “Has your pack come across anything new?”

Another pause, while Edward nodded to himself, unsurprised.

“Here’s the crux, Jacob. I won’t be letting Bella out of my sight till I get this taken care of. It’s nothing personal —”

Jacob interrupted him then, and I could hear the buzz of his voice from the receiver. Whatever he was saying, he was more intense than before. I tried unsuccessfully to make out the words.

“You might be right —,” Edward began, but Jacob was arguing again. Neither of them sounded angry, at least.

“That’s an interesting suggestion. We’re quite willing to renegotiate. If Sam is amenable.”

Jacob’s voice was quieter now. I started chewing on my thumbnail as I tried to read Edward’s expression.

“Thank you,” Edward replied.

Then Jacob said something that caused a surprised expression to flicker across Edward’s face.

"I'd planned to go alone, actually," Edward said, answering the unexpected question. "And leave her with the others."

Jacob's voice rose in pitch, and it sounded to me like he was trying to be persuasive.

"I'll try to consider it objectively," Edward promised. "As objectively as I'm capable of."

The pause was shorter this time.

"That's not a half-bad idea. When? ... No, that's fine. I'd like a chance to follow the trail personally, anyway. Ten minutes ... Certainly," Edward said. He held the phone out to me. "Bella?"

I took it slowly, feeling confused.

"What was that all about?" I asked Jacob, my voice peeved. I knew it was juvenile, but I felt excluded.

"A truce, I think. Hey, do me a favor," Jacob suggested. "Try to convince your bloodsucker that the safest place for you to be — especially when he leaves — is on the reservation. We're well able to handle anything."

"Is that what you were trying to sell him?"

"Yes. It makes sense. Charlie's probably better off here, too. As much as possible."

"Get Billy on it," I agreed. I hated that I was putting Charlie within the range of the crosshairs that always seemed to be centered on me. "What else?"

"Just rearranging some boundaries, so we can catch anyone who gets too near Forks. I'm not sure if Sam

will go for it, but until he comes around, I'll keep an eye on things."

"What do you mean by 'keep an eye on things'?"

"I mean that if you see a wolf running around your house, don't shoot at it."

"Of course not. You really shouldn't do anything ... risky, though."

He snorted. "Don't be stupid. I can take care of myself."

I sighed.

"I also tried to convince him to let you visit. He's prejudiced, so don't let him give you any crap about safety. He knows as well as I do that you'd be safe here."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"See you in a few," Jacob said.

"You're coming up?"

"Yeah. I'm going to get the scent of your visitor so we can track him if he comes back."

"Jake, I really don't like the idea of you tracking —"

"Oh please, Bella," he interrupted. Jacob laughed, and then hung up.

# Chapter 10

## SCENT

It was all very childish. Why on Earth should Edward have to leave for Jacob to come over? Weren't we past this kind of immaturity?

"It's not that I feel any personal antagonism toward him, Bella, it's just easier for both of us," Edward told me at the door. "I won't be far away. You'll be safe."

"I'm not worried about that."

He smiled, and then a sly look came into his eye. He pulled me close, burying his face in my hair. I could feel his cool breath saturate the strands as he exhaled; it raised goose bumps on my neck.

"I'll be right back," he said, and then he laughed aloud as if I'd just told a good joke.

"What's so funny?"

But Edward just grinned and loped off toward the trees without answering.

Grumbling to myself, I went to clean up the kitchen. Before I even had the sink full of water, the doorbell rang. It was hard to get used to how much faster Jacob was without his car. How everyone seemed to be so much faster than me… .

"Come in, Jake!" I shouted.

I was concentrating on piling the dishes into the bubbly water, and I'd forgotten that Jacob moved like

a ghost these days. So it made me jump when his voice was suddenly there behind me.

"Should you really leave your door unlocked like that? Oh, sorry."

I'd slopped myself with the dishwater when he'd startled me.

"I'm not worried about anyone who would be deterred by a locked door," I said while I wiped the front of my shirt with a dishtowel.

"Good point," he agreed.

I turned to look at him, eyeing him critically. "Is it really so impossible to wear clothes, Jacob?" I asked. Once again, Jacob was bare-chested, wearing nothing but a pair of old cut-off jeans. Secretly, I wondered if he was just so proud of his new muscles that he couldn't stand to cover them up. I had to admit, they were impressive — but I'd never thought of him as vain. "I mean, I know you don't get cold anymore, but still."

He ran a hand through his wet hair; it was falling in his eyes.

"It's just easier," he explained.

"What's easier?"

He smiled condescendingly. "It's enough of a pain to carry the shorts around with me, let alone a complete outfit. What do I look like, a pack mule?"

I frowned. "What are you talking about, Jacob?"

His expression was superior, like I was missing something obvious. “My clothes don’t just pop in and out of existence when I change — I have to carry them with me while I run. Pardon me for keeping my burden light.”

I changed color. “I guess I didn’t think about that,” I muttered.

He laughed and pointed to a black leather cord, thin as a strand of yarn, that was wound three times below his left calf like an anklet. I hadn’t noticed before that his feet were bare, too. “That’s more than just a fashion statement — it sucks to carry jeans in your mouth.”

I didn’t know what to say to that.

He grinned. “Does my being half-naked bother you?”

“No.”

Jacob laughed again, and I turned my back on him to focus on the dishes. I hoped he realized my blush was left over from embarrassment at my own stupidity, and had nothing to do with his question.

“Well, I suppose I should get to work.” He sighed. “I wouldn’t want to give him an excuse to say I’m slacking on my side.”

“Jacob, it’s not your job —”

He raised a hand to cut me off. “I’m working on a volunteer basis here. Now, where is the intruder’s scent the worst?”

“My bedroom, I think.”

His eyes narrowed. He didn't like that any more than Edward had.

"I'll just be a minute."

I methodically scrubbed the plate I was holding. The only sound was the brush's plastic bristles scraping round and round on the ceramic. I listened for something from above, a creak of the floorboard, the click of a door. There was nothing. I realized I'd been cleaning the same plate far longer than necessary, and I tried to pay attention to what I was doing.

"Whew!" Jacob said, inches behind me, scaring me again.

"Yeesh, Jake, cut that out!"

"Sorry. Here —" Jacob took the towel and mopped up my new spill. "I'll make it up to you. You wash, I'll rinse and dry."

"Fine." I gave him the plate.

"Well, the scent was easy enough to catch. By the way, your room reeks."

"I'll buy some air freshener."

He laughed.

I washed and he dried in companionable silence for a few minutes.

"Can I ask you something?"

I handed him another plate. "That depends on what you want to know."

"I'm not trying to be a jerk or anything — I'm honestly curious," Jacob assured me.

"Fine. Go ahead."

He paused for half a second. "What's it like — having a vampire for a boyfriend?"

I rolled my eyes. "It's the best."

"I'm serious. The idea doesn't bother you — it never creeps you out?"

"Never."

He was silent as he reached for the bowl in my hands. I peeked up at his face — he was frowning, his lower lip jutting out.

"Anything else?" I asked.

He wrinkled his nose again. "Well … I was wondering … do you … y'know, kiss him?"

I laughed. "Yes."

He shuddered. "Ugh."

"To each her own," I murmured.

"You don't worry about the fangs?"

I smacked his arm, splashing him with dishwater. "Shut up, Jacob! You know he doesn't have fangs!"

"Close enough," he muttered.

I gritted my teeth and scrubbed a boning knife with more force than necessary.

“Can I ask another one?” he asked softly when I passed the knife to him. “Just curious, again.”

“Fine,” I snapped.

He turned the knife over and over in his hands under the stream of water. When he spoke, it was only a whisper. “You said a few weeks… . When, exactly … ?” He couldn’t finish.

“Graduation,” I whispered back, watching his face warily. Would this set him off again?

“So soon,” he breathed, his eyes closing. It didn’t sound like a question. It sounded like a lament. The muscles in his arms tightened and his shoulders were stiff.

“OW!” he shouted; it had gotten so still in the room that I jumped a foot in the air at his outburst.

His right hand had curled into a tense fist around the blade of the knife — he unclenched his hand and the knife clattered onto the counter. Across his palm was a long, deep gash. The blood streamed down his fingers and dripped on the floor.

“Damn it! Ouch!” he complained.

My head spun and my stomach rolled. I clung to the countertop with one hand, took a deep breath through my mouth, and forced myself to get a grip so that I could take care of him.

“Oh, no, Jacob! Oh, crap! Here, wrap this around it!” I shoved the dish towel at him, reaching for his hand. He shrugged away from me.

“It’s nothing, Bella, don’t worry about it.”

The room started to shimmer a little around the edges.

I took another deep breath. “Don’t worry?! You sliced your hand open!”

He ignored the dish towel I pushed at him. He put his hand under the faucet and let the water wash over the wound. The water ran red. My head whirled.

“Bella,” he said.

I looked away from the wound, up to his face. He was frowning, but his expression was calm.

“What?”

“You look like you’re going to pass out, and you’re biting your lip off. Stop it. Relax. Breathe. I’m fine.”

I inhaled through my mouth and removed my teeth from my lower lip. “Don’t be brave.”

He rolled his eyes.

“Let’s go. I’ll drive you to the ER.” I was pretty sure I would be okay to drive. The walls were holding steady now, at least.

“Not necessary.” Jake turned off the water and took the towel from my hand. He twisted it loosely around his palm.

“Wait,” I protested. “Let me look at it.” I clutched the counter more firmly, to hold myself upright if the wound made me woozy again.

“Do you have a medical degree that you never told me about?”

"Just give me the chance to decide whether or not I'm going to throw a fit over taking you to the hospital."

He made a face of mock horror. "Please, not a fit!"

"If you don't let me see your hand, a fit is guaranteed."

He inhaled deeply, and then let out a gusty sigh. "Fine."

He unwound the towel and, when I reached out to take the cloth, he laid his hand in mine.

It took me a few seconds. I even flipped his hand over, though I was sure he'd cut his palm. I turned his hand back up, finally realizing that the angry pink, puckered line was all that was left of his wound.

"But … you were bleeding … so much."

He pulled his hand back, his eyes steady and somber on mine.

"I heal fast."

"I'll say," I mouthed.

I'd seen the long gash clearly, seen the blood that flowed into the sink. The rust-and-salt smell of it had almost pulled me under. It should have needed stitches. It should have taken days to scab over and then weeks to fade into the shiny pink scar that marked his skin now.

He screwed his mouth up into half a smile and thumped his fist once against his chest. "Werewolf, remember?"

His eyes held mine for an immeasurable moment.

"Right," I finally said.

He laughed at my expression. "I told you this. You saw Paul's scar."

I shook my head to clear it. "It's a little different, seeing the action sequence firsthand."

I kneeled down and dug the bleach out of the cabinet under the sink. Then I poured some on a dusting rag and started scrubbing the floor. The burning scent of the bleach cleared the last of the dizziness from my head.

"Let me clean up," Jacob said.

"I got this. Throw that towel in the wash, will you?"

When I was sure the floor smelled of nothing but bleach, I got up and rinsed the right side of the sink with bleach, too. Then I went to the laundry closet beside the pantry, and poured a cupful into the washing machine before starting it. Jacob watched me with a disapproving look on his face.

"Do you have obsessive-compulsive disorder?" he asked when I was done.

Huh. Maybe. But at least I had a good excuse this time. "We're a bit sensitive to blood around here. I'm sure you can understand that."

"Oh." He wrinkled his nose again.

"Why not make it as easy as possible for him? What he's doing is hard enough."

"Sure, sure. Why not?"

I pulled the plug, and let the dirty water drain from the sink.

"Can I ask you something, Bella?"

I sighed.

"What's it like — having a werewolf for a best friend?"

The question caught me off guard. I laughed out loud.

"Does it creep you out?" he pressed before I could answer.

"No. When the werewolf is being nice," I qualified, "it's the best."

He grinned widely, his teeth bright against his russet skin. "Thanks, Bella," he said, and then he grabbed my hand and wrenched me into one of his bone-crushing hugs.

Before I had time to react, he dropped his arms and stepped away.

"Ugh," he said, his nose wrinkling. "Your hair stinks worse than your room."

"Sorry," I muttered. I suddenly understood what Edward had been laughing about earlier, after breathing on me.

"One of the many hazards of socializing with vampires," Jacob said, shrugging. "It makes you smell bad. A minor hazard, comparatively."

I glared at him. "I only smell bad to you, Jake."

He grinned. "See you around, Bells."

"Are you leaving?"

"He's waiting for me to go. I can hear him outside."

"Oh."

"I'll go out the back," he said, and then he paused. "Hold up a sec — hey, do you think you can come to La Push tonight? We're having a bonfire party. Emily will be there, and you could meet Kim ... And I know Quil wants to see you, too. He's pretty peeved that you found out before he did."

I grinned at that. I could just imagine how that would have irked Quil — Jacob's little human gal pal down with the werewolves while he was still clueless. And then I sighed. "Yeah, Jake, I don't know about that. See, it's a little tense right now... ."

"C'mon, you think somebody's going to get past all — all six of us?"

There was a strange pause as he stuttered over the end of his question. I wondered if he had trouble saying the word werewolf aloud, the way I often had difficulty with vampire.

His big dark eyes were full of unashamed pleading.

"I'll ask," I said doubtfully.

He made a noise in the back of his throat. "Is he your warden, now, too? You know, I saw this story on the news last week about controlling, abusive teenage relationships and —"

“Okay!” I cut him off, and then shoved his arm. “Time for the werewolf to get out!”

He grinned. “Bye, Bells. Be sure you ask permission.”

He ducked out the back door before I could find something to throw at him. I growled incoherently at the empty room.

Seconds after he was gone, Edward walked slowly into the kitchen, raindrops glistening like diamonds set into the bronze of his hair. His eyes were wary.

“Did you two get into a fight?” he asked.

“Edward!” I sang, throwing myself at him.

“Hi, there.” He laughed and wrapped his arms around me. “Are you trying to distract me? It’s working.”

“No, I didn’t fight with Jacob. Much. Why?”

“I was just wondering why you stabbed him. Not that I object.” With his chin, he gestured to the knife on the counter.

“Dang! I thought I got everything.”

I pulled away from him and ran to put the knife in the sink before I doused it with bleach.

“I didn’t stab him,” I explained as I worked. “He forgot he had a knife in his hand.”

Edward chuckled. “That’s not nearly as fun as the way I imagined it.”

“Be nice.”

He took a big envelope from his jacket pocket and tossed it on the counter. “I got your mail.”

“Anything good?”

“I think so.”

My eyes narrowed suspiciously at his tone. I went to investigate.

He’d folded the legal-sized envelope in half. I smoothed it open, surprised at the weight of the expensive paper, and read the return address.

“Dartmouth? Is this a joke?”

“I’m sure it’s an acceptance. It looks exactly like mine.”

“Good grief, Edward — what did you do?”

“I sent in your application, that’s all.”

“I may not be Dartmouth material, but I’m not stupid enough to believe that.”

“Dartmouth seems to think that you’re Dartmouth material.”

I took a deep breath and counted slowly to ten. “That’s very generous of them,” I finally said. “However, accepted or not, there is still the minor matter of tuition. I can’t afford it, and I’m not letting you throw away enough money to buy yourself another sports car just so that I can pretend to go to Dartmouth next year.”

“I don’t need another sports car. And you don’t have to pretend anything,” he murmured. “One year of

college wouldn't kill you. Maybe you'd even like it. Just think about it, Bella. Imagine how excited Charlie and Renée would be… ."

His velvet voice painted the picture in my head before I could block it. Of course Charlie would explode with pride — no one in the town of Forks would be able to escape the fallout from his excitement. And Renée would be hysterical with joy at my triumph — though she'd swear she wasn't at all surprised… .

I tried to shake the image out of my head. "Edward. I'm worried about living through graduation, let alone this summer or next fall."

His arms wrapped around me again. "No one is going to hurt you. You have all the time in the world."

I sighed. "I'm mailing the contents of my bank account to Alaska tomorrow. It's all the alibi I need. It's far enough away that Charlie won't expect a visit until Christmas at the earliest. And I'm sure I'll think of some excuse by then. You know," I teased halfheartedly, "this whole secrecy and deception thing is kind of a pain."

Edward's expression hardened. "It gets easier. After a few decades, everyone you know is dead. Problem solved."

I flinched.

"Sorry, that was harsh."

I stared down at the big white envelope, not seeing it. "But still true."

"If I get this resolved, whatever it is we're dealing with, will you please consider waiting?"

“Nope.”

“Always so stubborn.”

“Yep.”

The washing machine thumped and stuttered to a halt.

“Stupid piece of junk,” I muttered as I pulled away from him. I moved the one small towel that had unbalanced the otherwise empty machine, and started it again.

“This reminds me,” I said. “Could you ask Alice what she did with my stuff when she cleaned my room? I can’t find it anywhere.”

He looked at me with confused eyes. “Alice cleaned your room?”

“Yeah, I guess that’s what she was doing. When she came to get my pajamas and pillow and stuff to hold me hostage.” I glowered at him briefly. “She picked up everything that was lying around, my shirts, my socks, and I don’t know where she put them.”

Edward continued to look confused for one short moment, and then, abruptly, he was rigid.

“When did you notice your things were missing?”

“When I got back from the fake slumber party. Why?”

“I don’t think Alice took anything. Not your clothes, or your pillow. The things that were taken, these were things you’d worn … and touched … and slept on?”

“Yes. What is it, Edward?”

His expression was strained. “Things with your scent.”

“Oh!”

We stared into each others eyes for a long moment.

“My visitor,” I muttered.

“He was gathering traces … evidence. To prove that he’d found you?”

“Why?” I whispered.

“I don’t know. But, Bella, I swear I will find out. I will.”

“I know you will,” I said, laying my head against his chest. Leaning there, I felt his phone vibrate in his pocket.

He pulled out his phone and glanced at the number. “Just the person I need to talk to,” he murmured, and then he flipped it open. “Carlisle, I —” He broke off and listened, his face taut with concentration for a few minutes. “I’ll check it out. Listen …”

He explained about my missing things, but from the side I was hearing, it sounded like Carlisle had no insights for us.

“Maybe I’ll go … ,” Edward said, trailing off as his eyes drifted toward me. “Maybe not. Don’t let Emmett go alone, you know how he gets. At least ask Alice keep an eye on things. We’ll figure this out later.”

He snapped the phone shut. “Where’s the paper?” he asked me.

"Um, I'm not sure. Why?"

"I need to see something. Did Charlie already throw it out?"

"Maybe… ."

Edward disappeared.

He was back in half a second, new diamonds in his hair, a wet newspaper in his hands. He spread it out on the table, his eyes scanning quickly across the headlines. He leaned in, intent on something he was reading, one finger tracing passages that interested him most.

"Carlisle's right … yes … very sloppy. Young and crazed? Or a death wish?" he muttered to himself.

I went to peek over his shoulder.

The headline of the Seattle Times read: "Murder Epidemic Continues — Police Have No New Leads."

It was almost the same story Charlie had been complaining about a few weeks ago — the big-city violence that was pushing Seattle up the national murder hot-spot list. It wasn't exactly the same story, though. The numbers were a lot higher.

"It's getting worse," I murmured.

He frowned. "Altogether out of control. This can't be the work of just one newborn vampire. What's going on? It's as if they've never heard of the Volturi. Which is possible, I guess. No one has explained the rules to them … so who is creating them, then?"

"The Volturi?" I repeated, shuddering.

"This is exactly the kind of thing they routinely wipe out — immortals who threaten to expose us. They just cleaned up a mess like this a few years ago in Atlanta, and it hadn't gotten nearly this bad. They will intervene soon, very soon, unless we can find some way to calm the situation. I'd really rather they didn't come to Seattle just now. As long as they're this close … they might decide to check on you."

I shuddered again. "What can we do?"

"We need to know more before we can decide that. Perhaps if we can talk to these young ones, explain the rules, it can be resolved peacefully." He frowned, like he didn't think the chances of that were good. "We'll wait until Alice has an idea of what's going on… . We don't want to step in until it's absolutely necessary. After all, it's not our responsibility. But it's good we have Jasper," he added, almost to himself. "If we are dealing with newborns, he'll be helpful."

"Jasper? Why?"

Edward smiled darkly. "Jasper is sort of an expert on young vampires."

"What do you mean, an expert?"

"You'll have to ask him — the story is involved."

"What a mess," I mumbled.

"It does feel that way, doesn't it? Like it's coming at us from all sides these days." He sighed. "Do you ever think that your life might be easier if you weren't in love with me?"

"Maybe. It wouldn't be much of a life, though."

"For me," he amended quietly. "And now, I suppose," he continued with a wry smile, "you have something you want to ask me?"

I stared at him blankly. "I do?"

"Or maybe not." He grinned. "I was rather under the impression that you'd promised to ask my permission to go to some kind of werewolf soirée tonight."

"Eavesdropping again?"

He grinned. "Just a bit, at the very end."

"Well, I wasn't going to ask you anyway. I figured you had enough to stress about."

He put his hand under my chin, and held my face so that he could read my eyes. "Would you like to go?"

"It's no big thing. Don't worry about it."

"You don't have to ask my permission, Bella. I'm not your father — thank heaven for that. Perhaps you should ask Charlie, though."

"But you know Charlie will say yes."

"I do have a bit more insight into his probable answer than most people would, it's true."

I just stared at him, trying to understand what he wanted, and trying to put out of my mind the yearning I felt to go to La Push so that I wouldn't be swayed by my own wishes. It was stupid to want to go hang out with a bunch of big idiot wolf-boys right now when there was so much that was frightening and unexplained going on. Of course, that was exactly why I wanted to go. I wanted to escape the death

threats, for just a few hours ... to be the less-mature, more-reckless Bella who could laugh it off with Jacob, if only briefly. But that didn't matter.

"Bella," Edward said. "I told you that I was going to be reasonable and trust your judgment. I meant that. If you trust the werewolves, then I'm not going to worry about them."

"Wow," I said, as I had last night.

"And Jacob's right — about one thing, anyway — a pack of werewolves ought to be enough to protect even you for one evening."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. Only ..."

I braced myself.

"I hope you won't mind taking a few precautions? Allowing me to drive you to the boundary line, for one. And then taking a cell phone, so that I'll know when to pick you up?"

"That sounds ... very reasonable."

"Excellent."

He smiled at me, and I could see no trace of apprehension in his jewel-like eyes.

To no one's surprise, Charlie had no problem at all with me going to La Push for a bonfire. Jacob crowed with undisguised exultation when I called to give him the news, and he seemed eager enough to embrace Edward's safety measures. He promised to meet us at the line between territories at six.

I had decided, after a short internal debate, that I would not sell my motorcycle. I would take it back to La Push where it belonged and, when I no longer needed it anymore … well, then, I would insist that Jacob profit from his work somehow. He could sell it or give it to a friend. It didn't matter to me.

Tonight seemed like a good opportunity to return the bike to Jacob's garage. As gloomy as I was feeling about things lately, every day seemed like a possible last chance. I didn't have time to procrastinate any task, no matter how minor.

Edward only nodded when I explained what I wanted, but I thought I saw a flicker of consternation in his eyes, and I knew he was no happier about the idea of me on a motorcycle than Charlie was.

I followed him back to his house, to the garage where I'd left the bike. It wasn't until I pulled the truck in and got out that I realized the consternation might not be entirely about my safety this time.

Next to my little antique motorcycle, overshadowing it, was another vehicle. To call this other vehicle a motorcycle hardly seemed fair, since it didn't seem to belong to the same family as my suddenly shabby-looking bike.

It was big and sleek and silver and — even totally motionless — it looked fast.

"What is that?"

"Nothing," Edward murmured.

"It doesn't look like nothing."

Edward's expression was casual; he seemed determined to blow it off. "Well, I didn't know if you were going to forgive your friend, or he you, and I wondered if you would still want to ride your bike anyway. It sounded like it was something that you enjoyed. I thought I could go with you, if you wished." He shrugged.

I stared at the beautiful machine. Beside it, my bike looked like a broken tricycle. I felt a sudden wave of sadness when I realized that this was not a bad analogy for the way I probably looked next to Edward.

"I wouldn't be able to keep up with you," I whispered.

Edward put his hand under my chin and pulled my face around so that he could see it straight on. With one finger, he tried to push the corner of my mouth up.

"I'd keep pace with you, Bella."

"That wouldn't be much fun for you."

"Of course it would, if we were together."

I bit my lip and imagined it for a moment. "Edward, if you thought I was going too fast or losing control of the bike or something, what would you do?"

He hesitated, obviously trying to find the right answer. I knew the truth: he'd find some way to save me before I crashed.

Then he smiled. It looked effortless, except for the tiny defensive tightening of his eyes.

"This is something you do with Jacob. I see that now."

“It’s just that, well, I don’t slow him down so much, you know. I could try, I guess… .”

I eyed the silver motorcycle doubtfully.

“Don’t worry about it,” Edward said, and then he laughed lightly. “I saw Jasper admiring it. Perhaps it’s time he discovered a new way to travel. After all, Alice has her Porsche now.”

“Edward, I —”

He interrupted me with a quick kiss. “I said not to worry. But would you do something for me?”

“Whatever you need,” I promised quickly.

He dropped my face and leaned over the far side of the big motorcycle, retrieving something he had stashed there.

He came back with one object that was black and shapeless, and another that was red and easily identifiable.

“Please?” he asked, flashing the crooked smile that always destroyed my resistance.

I took the red helmet, weighing it in my hands. “I’ll look stupid.”

“No, you’ll look smart. Smart enough not to get yourself hurt.” He threw the black thing, whatever it was, over his arm and then took my face in his hands. “There are things between my hands right now that I can’t live without. You could take care of them.”

“Okay, fine. What’s that other thing?” I asked suspiciously.

He laughed and shook out some kind of padded jacket. “It’s a riding jacket. I hear road rash is quite uncomfortable, not that I would know myself.”

He held it out for me. With a deep sigh, I flipped my hair back and stuffed the helmet on my head. Then I shoved my arms through the sleeves of the jacket. He zipped me in, a smile playing around the corners of his lips, and took a step back.

I felt bulky.

“Be honest, how hideous do I look?”

He took another step back and pursed his lips.

“That bad, huh?” I muttered.

“No, no, Bella. Actually ...” he seemed to be struggling for the right word. “You look ... sexy.”

I laughed out loud. “Right.”

“Very sexy, really.”

“You are just saying that so that I’ll wear it,” I said. “But that’s okay. You’re right, it’s smarter.”

He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me against his chest. “You’re silly. I suppose that’s part of your charm. Though, I’ll admit it, this helmet does have its drawbacks.”

And then he pulled the helmet off so that he could kiss me.

As Edward drove me toward La Push a little while later, I realized that this unprecedented situation felt

oddly familiar. It took me a moment of thought to pinpoint the source of the déjà vu.

"You know what this reminds me of?" I asked. "It's just like when I was a kid and Renée would pass me off to Charlie for the summer. I feel like a seven-year-old."

Edward laughed.

I didn't mention it out loud, but the biggest difference between the two circumstances was that Renée and Charlie had been on better terms.

About halfway to La Push, we rounded the corner and found Jacob leaning against the side of the red Volkswagen he'd built for himself out of scraps. Jacob's carefully neutral expression dissolved into a smile when I waved from the front seat.

Edward parked the Volvo thirty yards away.

"Call me whenever you're ready to come home," he said. "And I'll be here."

"I won't be out late," I promised.

Edward pulled the bike and my new gear out of the trunk of his car — I'd been quite impressed that it had all fit. But it wasn't so hard to manage when you were strong enough to juggle full-sized vans, let alone small motorcycles.

Jacob watched, making no move to approach, his smile gone and his dark eyes indecipherable.

I tucked the helmet under my arm and threw the jacket across the seat.

"Do you have it all?" Edward asked.

"No problem," I assured him.

He sighed and leaned toward me. I turned my face up for a goodbye peck, but Edward took me by surprise, fastening his arms tightly around me and kissing me with as much enthusiasm as he had in the garage — before long, I was gasping for air.

Edward laughed quietly at something, and then let me go.

"Goodbye," he said. "I really do like the jacket."

As I turned away from him, I thought I saw a flash of something in his eyes that I wasn't supposed to see. I couldn't tell for sure what it was exactly. Worry, maybe. For a second I thought it was panic. But I was probably just making something out of nothing, as usual.

I could feel his eyes on my back as I pushed my bike toward the invisible vampire-werewolf treaty line to meet Jacob.

"What's all that?" Jacob called to me, his voice wary, scrutinizing the motorcycle with an enigmatic expression.

"I thought I should put this back where it belongs," I told him.

He pondered that for one short second, and then his wide smile stretched across his face.

I knew the exact point that I was in werewolf territory because Jacob shoved away from his car and loped quickly over to me, closing the distance in three long

strides. He took the bike from me, balanced it on the kickstand, and grabbed me up in another vice-tight hug.

I heard the Volvo's engine growl, and I struggled to get free.

"Cut it out, Jake!" I gasped breathlessly.

He laughed and set me down. I turned to wave goodbye, but the silver car was already disappearing around the curve in the road.

"Nice," I commented, allowing some acid to leak into my voice.

His eyes widened in false innocence. "What?"

"He's being pretty dang pleasant about this; you don't need to push your luck."

He laughed again, louder than before — he found what I'd said very funny indeed. I tried to see the joke as he walked around the Rabbit to hold my door open for me.

"Bella," he finally said — still chuckling — as he shut the door behind me, "you can't push what you don't have."

# Chapter 11

## LEGENDS

“Are you gonna eat that Hot Dog?” Paul asked Jacob, his eyes locked on the last remnant of the huge meal the werewolves had consumed.

Jacob leaned back against my knees and toyed with the hot dog he had spitted on a straightened wire hanger; the flames at the edge of the bonfire licked along its blistered skin. He heaved a sigh and patted his stomach. It was somehow still flat, though I’d lost count of how many hot dogs he’d eaten after his tenth. Not to mention the super-sized bag of chips or the two-liter bottle of root beer.

“I guess,” Jake said slowly. “I’m so full I’m about to puke, but I think I can force it down. I won’t enjoy it at all, though.” He sighed again sadly.

Despite the fact that Paul had eaten at least as much as Jacob, he glowered and his hands balled up into fists.

“Sheesh.” Jacob laughed. “Kidding, Paul. Here.”

He flipped the homemade skewer across the circle. I expected it to land hot-dog-first in the sand, but Paul caught it neatly on the right end without difficulty.

Hanging out with no one but extremely dexterous people all the time was going to give me a complex.

“Thanks, man,” Paul said, already over his brief fit of temper.

The fire crackled, settling lower toward the sand. Sparks blew up in a sudden puff of brilliant orange against the black sky. Funny, I hadn't noticed that the sun had set. For the first time, I wondered how late it had gotten. I'd lost track of time completely.

It was easier being with my Quileute friends than I'd expected.

While Jacob and I had dropped off my bike at the garage — and he had admitted ruefully that the helmet was a good idea that he should have thought of himself — I'd started to worry about showing up with him at the bonfire, wondering if the werewolves would consider me a traitor now. Would they be angry with Jacob for inviting me? Would I ruin the party?

But when Jacob had towed me out of the forest to the clifftop meeting place — where the fire already roared brighter than the cloud-obscured sun — it had all been very casual and light.

"Hey, vampire girl!" Embry had greeted me loudly. Quil had jumped up to give me a high five and kiss me on the cheek. Emily had squeezed my hand when we'd sat on the cool stone ground beside her and Sam.

Other than a few teasing complaints — mostly by Paul — about keeping the bloodsucker stench downwind, I was treated like someone who belonged.

It wasn't just kids in attendance, either. Billy was here, his wheelchair stationed at what seemed the natural head of the circle. Beside him on a folding lawn chair, looking quite brittle, was Quil's ancient, white-haired grandfather, Old Quil. Sue Clearwater, widow of Charlie's friend Harry, had a chair on his other side; her two children, Leah and Seth, were also

there, sitting on the ground like the rest of us. This surprised me, but all three were clearly in on the secret now. From the way Billy and Old Quil spoke to Sue, it sounded to me like she'd taken Harry's place on the council. Did that make her children automatic members of La Push's most secret society?

I wondered how horrible it was for Leah to sit across the circle from Sam and Emily. Her lovely face betrayed no emotion, but she never looked away from the flames. Looking at the perfection of Leah's features, I couldn't help but compare them to Emily's ruined face. What did Leah think of Emily's scars, now that she knew the truth behind them? Did it seem like justice in her eyes?

Little Seth Clearwater wasn't so little anymore. With his huge, happy grin and his long, gangly build, he reminded me very much of a younger Jacob. The resemblance made me smile, and then sigh. Was Seth doomed to have his life change as drastically as the rest of these boys? Was that future why he and his family were allowed to be here?

The whole pack was there: Sam with his Emily, Paul, Embry, Quil, and Jared with Kim, the girl he'd imprinted upon.

My first impression of Kim was that she was a nice girl, a little shy, and a little plain. She had a wide face, mostly cheekbones, with eyes too small to balance them out. Her nose and mouth were both too broad for traditional beauty. Her flat black hair was thin and wispy in the wind that never seemed to let up atop the cliff.

That was my first impression. But after a few hours of watching Jared watch Kim, I could no longer find anything plain about the girl.

The way he stared at her! It was like a blind man seeing the sun for the first time. Like a collector finding an undiscovered Da Vinci, like a mother looking into the face of her newborn child.

His wondering eyes made me see new things about her — how her skin looked like russet-colored silk in the firelight, how the shape of her lips was a perfect double curve, how white her teeth were against them, how long her eyelashes were, brushing her cheek when she looked down.

Kim's skin sometimes darkened when she met Jared's awed gaze, and her eyes would drop as if in embarrassment, but she had a hard time keeping her eyes away from his for any length of time.

Watching them, I felt like I better understood what Jacob had told me about imprinting before — it's hard to resist that level of commitment and adoration.

Kim was nodding off now against Jared's chest, his arms around her. I imagined she would be very warm there.

"It's getting late," I murmured to Jacob.

"Don't start that yet," Jacob whispered back — though certainly half the group here had hearing sensitive enough to hear us anyway. "The best part is coming."

"What's the best part? You swallowing an entire cow whole?"

Jacob chuckled his low, throaty laugh. "No. That's the finale. We didn't meet just to eat through a week's worth of food. This is technically a council meeting. It's Quil's first time, and he hasn't heard the stories

yet. Well, he's heard them, but this will be the first time he knows they're true. That tends to make a guy pay closer attention. Kim and Seth and Leah are all first-timers, too."

"Stories?"

Jacob scooted back beside me, where I rested against a low ridge of rock. He put his arm over my shoulder and spoke even lower into my ear.

"The histories we always thought were legends," he said. "The stories of how we came to be. The first is the story of the spirit warriors."

It was almost as if Jacob's soft whisper was the introduction. The atmosphere changed abruptly around the low-burning fire. Paul and Embry sat up straighter. Jared nudged Kim and then pulled her gently upright.

Emily produced a spiral-bound notebook and a pen, looking exactly like a student set for an important lecture. Sam twisted just slightly beside her — so that he was facing the same direction as Old Quil, who was on his other side — and suddenly I realized that the elders of the council here were not three, but four in number.

Leah Clearwater, her face still a beautiful and emotionless mask, closed her eyes — not like she was tired, but as if to help her concentration. Her brother leaned in toward the elders eagerly.

The fire crackled, sending another explosion of sparks glittering up against the night.

Billy cleared his throat, and, with no more introduction than his son's whisper, began telling the

story in his rich, deep voice. The words poured out with precision, as if he knew them by heart, but also with feeling and a subtle rhythm. Like poetry performed by its author.

"The Quileutes have been a small people from the beginning," Billy said. "And we are a small people still, but we have never disappeared. This is because there has always been magic in our blood. It wasn't always the magic of shape-shifting — that came later. First, we were spirit warriors."

Never before had I recognized the ring of majesty that was in Billy Black's voice, though I realized now that this authority had always been there.

Emily's pen sprinted across the sheets of paper as she tried to keep up with him.

"In the beginning, the tribe settled in this harbor and became skilled ship builders and fishermen. But the tribe was small, and the harbor was rich in fish. There were others who coveted our land, and we were too small to hold it. A larger tribe moved against us, and we took to our ships to escape them.

"Kaheleha was not the first spirit warrior, but we do not remember the stories that came before his. We do not remember who was the first to discover this power, or how it had been used before this crisis. Kaheleha was the first great Spirit Chief in our history. In this emergency, Kaheleha used the magic to defend our land.

"He and all his warriors left the ship — not their bodies, but their spirits. Their women watched over the bodies and the waves, and the men took their spirits back to our harbor.

"They could not physically touch the enemy tribe, but they had other ways. The stories tell us that they could blow fierce winds into their enemy's camps; they could make a great screaming in the wind that terrified their foes. The stories also tell us that the animals could see the spirit warriors and understand them; the animals would do their bidding.

"Kaheleha took his spirit army and wreaked havoc on the intruders. This invading tribe had packs of big, thick-furred dogs that they used to pull their sleds in the frozen north. The spirit warriors turned the dogs against their masters and then brought a mighty infestation of bats up from the cliff caverns. They used the screaming wind to aid the dogs in confusing the men. The dogs and bats won. The survivors scattered, calling our harbor a cursed place. The dogs ran wild when the spirit warriors released them. The Quileutes returned to their bodies and their wives, victorious.

"The other nearby tribes, the Hohs and the Makahs, made treaties with the Quileutes. They wanted nothing to do with our magic. We lived in peace with them. When an enemy came against us, the spirit warriors would drive them off.

"Generations passed. Then came the last great Spirit Chief, Taha Aki. He was known for his wisdom, and for being a man of peace. The people lived well and content in his care.

"But there was one man, Utlapa, who was not content."

A low hiss ran around the fire. I was too slow to see where it came from. Billy ignored it and went on with the legend.

"Utlapa was one of Chief Taha Aki's strongest spirit warriors — a powerful man, but a grasping man, too. He thought the people should use their magic to expand their lands, to enslave the Hohs and the Makahs and build an empire.

"Now, when the warriors were their spirit selves, they knew each other's thoughts. Taha Aki saw what Utlapa dreamed, and was angry with Utlapa. Utlapa was commanded to leave the people, and never use his spirit self again. Utlapa was a strong man, but the chief's warriors outnumbered him. He had no choice but to leave. The furious outcast hid in the forest nearby, waiting for a chance to get revenge against the chief.

"Even in times of peace, the Spirit Chief was vigilant in protecting his people. Often, he would go to a sacred, secret place in the mountains. He would leave his body behind and sweep down through the forests and along the coast, making sure no threat approached.

"One day when Taha Aki left to perform this duty, Utlapa followed. At first, Utlapa simply planned to kill the chief, but this plan had its drawbacks. Surely the spirit warriors would seek to destroy him, and they could follow faster than he could escape. As he hid in the rocks and watched the chief prepare to leave his body, another plan occurred to him.

"Taha Aki left his body in the secret place and flew with the winds to keep watch over his people. Utlapa waited until he was sure the chief had traveled some distance with his spirit self.

"Taha Aki knew it the instant that Utlapa had joined him in the spirit world, and he also knew Utlapa's murderous plan. He raced back to his secret place,

but even the winds weren't fast enough to save him. When he returned, his body was already gone. Utlapa's body lay abandoned, but Utlapa had not left Taha Aki with an escape — he had cut his own body's throat with Taha Aki's hands.

"Taha Aki followed his body down the mountain. He screamed at Utlapa, but Utlapa ignored him as if he were mere wind.

"Taha Aki watched with despair as Utlapa took his place as chief of the Quileutes. For a few weeks, Utlapa did nothing but make sure that everyone believed he was Taha Aki. Then the changes began — Utlapa's first edict was to forbid any warrior to enter the spirit world. He claimed that he'd had a vision of danger, but really he was afraid. He knew that Taha Aki would be waiting for the chance to tell his story. Utlapa was also afraid to enter the spirit world himself, knowing Taha Aki would quickly claim his body. So his dreams of conquest with a spirit warrior army were impossible, and he sought to content himself with ruling over the tribe. He became a burden — seeking privileges that Taha Aki had never requested, refusing to work alongside his warriors, taking a young second wife and then a third, though Taha Aki's wife lived on — something unheard of in the tribe. Taha Aki watched in helpless fury.

"Eventually, Taha Aki tried to kill his body to save the tribe from Utlapa's excesses. He brought a fierce wolf down from the mountains, but Utlapa hid behind his warriors. When the wolf killed a young man who was protecting the false chief, Taha Aki felt horrible grief. He ordered the wolf away.

"All the stories tell us that it was no easy thing to be a spirit warrior. It was more frightening than exhilarating to be freed from one's body. This is why

they only used their magic in times of need. The chief's solitary journeys to keep watch were a burden and a sacrifice. Being bodiless was disorienting, uncomfortable, horrifying. Taha Aki had been away from his body for so long at this point that he was in agony. He felt he was doomed — never to cross over to the final land where his ancestors waited, stuck in this torturous nothingness forever.

"The great wolf followed Taha Aki's spirit as he twisted and writhed in agony through the woods. The wolf was very large for its kind, and beautiful. Taha Aki was suddenly jealous of the dumb animal. At least it had a body. At least it had a life. Even life as an animal would be better than this horrible empty consciousness.

"And then Taha Aki had the idea that changed us all. He asked the great wolf to make room for him, to share. The wolf complied. Taka Aki entered the wolf's body with relief and gratitude. It was not his human body, but it was better than the void of the spirit world.

"As one, the man and the wolf returned to the village on the harbor. The people ran in fear, shouting for the warriors to come. The warriors ran to meet the wolf with their spears. Utlapa, of course, stayed safely hidden.

"Taha Aki did not attack his warriors. He retreated slowly from them, speaking with his eyes and trying to yelp the songs of his people. The warriors began to realize that the wolf was no ordinary animal, that there was a spirit influencing it. One older warrior, a man name Yut, decided to disobey the false chief's order and try to communicate with the wolf.

"As soon as Yut crossed to the spirit world, Taha Aki left the wolf — the animal waited tamely for his return — to speak to him. Yut gathered the truth in an instant, and welcomed his true chief home.

"At this time, Utlapa came to see if the wolf had been defeated. When he saw Yut lying lifeless on the ground, surrounded by protective warriors, he realized what was happening. He drew his knife and raced forward to kill Yut before he could return to his body.

"'Traitor,' he screamed, and the warriors did not know what to do. The chief had forbidden spirit journeys, and it was the chief's decision how to punish those who disobeyed.

"Yut jumped back into his body, but Utlapa had his knife at his throat and a hand covering his mouth. Taha Aki's body was strong, and Yut was weak with age. Yut could not say even one word to warn the others before Utlapa silenced him forever.

"Taha Aki watched as Yut's spirit slipped away to the final lands that were barred to Taha Aki for all eternity. He felt a great rage, more powerful than anything he'd felt before. He entered the big wolf again, meaning to rip Utlapa's throat out. But, as he joined the wolf, the greatest magic happened.

"Taha Aki's anger was the anger of a man. The love he had for his people and the hatred he had for their oppressor were too vast for the wolf's body, too human. The wolf shuddered, and — before the eyes of the shocked warriors and Utlapa — transformed into a man.

"The new man did not look like Taha Aki's body. He was far more glorious. He was the flesh interpretation

of Taha Aki's spirit. The warriors recognized him at once, though, for they had flown with Taha Aki's spirit.

"Utlapa tried to run, but Taha Aki had the strength of the wolf in his new body. He caught the thief and crushed the spirit from him before he could jump out of the stolen body.

"The people rejoiced when they understood what had happened. Taha Aki quickly set everything right, working again with his people and giving the young wives back to their families. The only change he kept in place was the end of the spirit travels. He knew that it was too dangerous now that the idea of stealing a life was there. The spirit warriors were no more.

"From that point on, Taha Aki was more than either wolf or man. They called him Taha Aki the Great Wolf, or Taha Aki the Spirit Man. He led the tribe for many, many years, for he did not age. When danger threatened, he would resume his wolf-self to fight or frighten the enemy. The people dwelt in peace. Taha Aki fathered many sons, and some of these found that, after they had reached the age of manhood, they, too, could transform into wolves. The wolves were all different, because they were spirit wolves and reflected the man they were inside."

"So that's why Sam is all black," Quil muttered under his breath, grinning. "Black heart, black fur."

I was so involved in the story, it was a shock to come back to the present, to the circle around the dying fire. With another shock, I realized that the circle was made up of Taha Aki's great — to however many degrees — grandsons.

The fire threw a volley of sparks into the sky, and they shivered and danced, making shapes that were almost decipherable.

“And your chocolate fur reflects what?” Sam whispered back to Quil. “How sweet you are?”

Billy ignored their jibes. “Some of the sons became warriors with Taha Aki, and they no longer aged. Others, who did not like the transformation, refused to join the pack of wolf-men. These began to age again, and the tribe discovered that the wolf-men could grow old like anyone else if they gave up their spirit wolves. Taha Aki had lived the span of three old men’s lives. He had married a third wife after the deaths of the first two, and found in her his true spirit wife. Though he had loved the others, this was something else. He decided to give up his spirit wolf so that he would die when she did.

“That is how the magic came to us, but it is not the end of the story… .”

He looked at Old Quil Ateara, who shifted in his chair, straightening his frail shoulders. Billy took a drink from a bottle of water and wiped his forehead. Emily’s pen never hesitated as she scribbled furiously on the paper.

“That was the story of the spirit warriors,” Old Quil began in a thin tenor voice. “This is the story of the third wife’s sacrifice.

“Many years after Taha Aki gave up his spirit wolf, when he was an old man, trouble began in the north, with the Makahs. Several young women of their tribe had disappeared, and they blamed it on the neighboring wolves, who they feared and mistrusted. The wolf-men could still read each other’s thoughts

while in their wolf forms, just like their ancestors had while in their spirit forms. They knew that none of their number was to blame. Taha Aki tried to pacify the Makah chief, but there was too much fear. Taha Aki did not want to have a war on his hands. He was no longer a warrior to lead his people. He charged his oldest wolf-son, Taha Wi, with finding the true culprit before hostilities began.

“Taha Wi led the five other wolves in his pack on a search through the mountains, looking for any evidence of the missing Makahs. They came across something they had never encountered before — a strange, sweet scent in the forest that burned their noses to the point of pain.”

I shrank a little closer to Jacob’s side. I saw the corner of his mouth twitch with humor, and his arm tightened around me.

“They did not know what creature would leave such a scent, but they followed it,” Old Quil continued. His quavering voice did not have the majesty of Billy’s, but it had a strange, fierce edge of urgency about it. My pulse jumped as his words came faster.

“They found faint traces of human scent, and human blood, along the trail. They were sure this was the enemy they were searching for.

“The journey took them so far north that Taha Wi sent half the pack, the younger ones, back to the harbor to report to Taha Aki.

“Taha Wi and his two brothers did not return.

“The younger brothers searched for their elders, but found only silence. Taha Aki mourned for his sons. He wished to avenge his sons’ death, but he was old.

He went to the Makah chief in his mourning clothes and told him everything that had happened. The Makah chief believed his grief, and tensions ended between the tribes.

“A year later, two Makah maidens disappeared from their homes on the same night. The Makahs called on the Quileute wolves at once, who found the same sweet stink all through the Makah village. The wolves went on the hunt again.

“Only one came back. He was Yaha Uta, the oldest son of Taka Aki’s third wife, and the youngest in the pack. He brought something with him that had never been seen in all the days of the Quileutes — a strange, cold, stony corpse that he carried in pieces. All who were of Taha Aki’s blood, even those who had never been wolves, could smell the piercing smell of the dead creature. This was the enemy of the Makahs.

“Yaha Uta described what had happened: he and his brothers had found the creature, who looked like a man but was hard as a granite rock, with the two Makah daughters. One girl was already dead, white and bloodless on the ground. The other was in the creature’s arms, his mouth at her throat. She may have been alive when they came upon the hideous scene, but the creature quickly snapped her neck and tossed her lifeless body to the ground when they approached. His white lips were covered in her blood, and his eyes glowed red.

“Yaha Uta described the fierce strength and speed of the creature. One of his brothers quickly became a victim when he underestimated that strength. The creature ripped him apart like a doll. Yaha Uta and his other brother were more wary. They worked together, coming at the creature from the sides, outmaneuvering it. They had to reach the very limits

of their wolf strength and speed, something that had never been tested before. The creature was hard as stone and cold as ice. They found that only their teeth could damage it. They began to rip small pieces of the creature apart while it fought them.

"But the creature learned quickly, and soon was matching their maneuvers. It got its hands on Yaha Uta's brother. Yaha Uta found an opening on the creature's throat, and he lunged. His teeth tore the head off the creature, but the hands continued to mangle his brother.

"Yaha Uta ripped the creature into unrecognizable chunks, tearing pieces apart in a desperate attempt to save his brother. He was too late, but, in the end, the creature was destroyed.

"Or so they thought. Yaha Uta laid the reeking remains out to be examined by the elders. One severed hand lay beside a piece of the creature's granite arm. The two pieces touched when the elders poked them with sticks, and the hand reached out towards the arm piece, trying to reassemble itself.

"Horrified, the elders set fire to the remains. A great cloud of choking, vile smoke polluted the air. When there was nothing but ashes, they separated the ashes into many small bags and spread them far and wide — some in the ocean, some in the forest, some in the cliff caverns. Taha Aki wore one bag around his neck, so he would be warned if the creature ever tried to put himself together again."

Old Quil paused and looked at Billy. Billy pulled out a leather thong from around his neck. Hanging from the end was a small bag, blackened with age. A few people gasped. I might have been one of them.

“They called it The Cold One, the Blood Drinker, and lived in fear that it was not alone. They only had one wolf protector left, young Yaha Uta.

“They did not have long to wait. The creature had a mate, another blood drinker, who came to the Quileutes seeking revenge.

“The stories say that the Cold Woman was the most beautiful thing human eyes had ever seen. She looked like the goddess of the dawn when she entered the village that morning; the sun was shining for once, and it glittered off her white skin and lit the golden hair that flowed down to her knees. Her face was magical in its beauty, her eyes black in her white face. Some fell to their knees to worship her.

“She asked something in a high, piercing voice, in a language no one had ever heard. The people were dumbfounded, not knowing how to answer her. There was none of Taha Aki’s blood among the witnesses but one small boy. He clung to his mother and screamed that the smell was hurting his nose. One of the elders, on his way to council, heard the boy and realized what had come among them. He yelled for the people to run. She killed him first.

“There were twenty witnesses to the Cold Woman’s approach. Two survived, only because she grew distracted by the blood, and paused to sate her thirst. They ran to Taha Aki, who sat in counsel with the other elders, his sons, and his third wife.

“Yaha Uta transformed into his spirit wolf as soon as he heard the news. He went to destroy the blood drinker alone. Taha Aki, his third wife, his sons, and his elders followed behind him.

“At first they could not find the creature, only the evidence of her attack. Bodies lay broken, a few drained of blood, strewn across the road where she’d appeared. Then they heard the screams and hurried to the harbor.

“A handful of the Quileutes had run to the ships for refuge. She swam after them like a shark, and broke the bow of their boat with her incredible strength. When the ship sank, she caught those trying to swim away and broke them, too.

“She saw the great wolf on the shore, and she forgot the fleeing swimmers. She swam so fast she was a blur and came, dripping and glorious, to stand before Yaha Uta. She pointed at him with one white finger and asked another incomprehensible question. Yaha Uta waited.

“It was a close fight. She was not the warrior her mate had been. But Yaha Uta was alone — there was no one to distract her fury from him.

“When Yaha Uta lost, Taha Aki screamed in defiance. He limped forward and shifted into an ancient, white-muzzled wolf. The wolf was old, but this was Taha Aki the Spirit Man, and his rage made him strong. The fight began again.

“Taha Aki’s third wife had just seen her son die before her. Now her husband fought, and she had no hope that he could win. She’d heard every word the witnesses to the slaughter had told the council. She’d heard the story of Yaha Uta’s first victory, and knew that his brother’s diversion had saved him.

“The third wife grabbed a knife from the belt of one of the sons who stood beside her. They were all young

sons, not yet men, and she knew they would die when their father failed.

“The third wife ran toward the Cold Woman with the dagger raised high. The Cold Woman smiled, barely distracted from her fight with the old wolf. She had no fear of the weak human woman or the knife that would not even scratch her skin, and she was about to deliver the death blow to Taha Aki.

“And then the third wife did something the Cold Woman did not expect. She fell to her knees at the blood drinker’s feet and plunged the knife into her own heart.

“Blood spurted through the third wife’s fingers and splashed against the Cold Woman. The blood drinker could not resist the lure of the fresh blood leaving the third wife’s body. Instinctively, she turned to the dying woman, for one second entirely consumed by thirst.

“Taha Aki’s teeth closed around her neck.

“That was not the end of the fight, but Taha Aki was not alone now. Watching their mother die, two young sons felt such rage that they sprang forth as their spirit wolves, though they were not yet men. With their father, they finished the creature.

“Taha Aki never rejoined the tribe. He never changed back to a man again. He lay for one day beside the body of the third wife, growling whenever anyone tried to touch her, and then he went into the forest and never returned.

“Trouble with the cold ones was rare from that time on. Taha Aki’s sons guarded the tribe until their sons were old enough to take their places. There were

never more than three wolves at a time. It was enough. Occasionally a blood drinker would come through these lands, but they were taken by surprise, not expecting the wolves. Sometimes a wolf would die, but never were they decimated again like that first time. They'd learned how to fight the cold ones, and they passed the knowledge on, wolf mind to wolf mind, spirit to spirit, father to son.

"Time passed, and the descendants of Taha Aki no longer became wolves when they reached manhood. Only in a great while, if a cold one was near, would the wolves return. The cold ones always came in ones and twos, and the pack stayed small.

"A bigger coven came, and your own great-grandfathers prepared to fight them off. But the leader spoke to Ephraim Black as if he were a man, and promised not to harm the Quileutes. His strange yellow eyes gave some proof to his claim that they were not the same as other blood drinkers. The wolves were outnumbered; there was no need for the cold ones to offer a treaty when they could have won the fight. Ephraim accepted. They've stayed true to their side, though their presence does tend to draw in others.

"And their numbers have forced a larger pack than the tribe has ever seen," Old Quil said, and for one moment his black eyes, all but buried in the wrinkles of skin folded around them, seemed to rest on me. "Except, of course, in Taha Aki's time," he said, and then he sighed. "And so the sons of our tribe again carry the burden and share the sacrifice their fathers endured before them."

All was silent for a long moment. The living descendants of magic and legend stared at one

another across the fire with sadness in their eyes. All but one.

“Burden,” he scoffed in a low voice. “I think it’s cool.” Quil’s full lower lip pouted out a little bit.

Across the dying fire, Seth Clearwater — his eyes wide with adulation for the fraternity of tribal protectors — nodded his agreement.

Billy chuckled, low and long, and the magic seemed to fade into the glowing embers. Suddenly, it was just a circle of friends again. Jared flicked a small stone at Quil, and everyone laughed when it made him jump. Low conversations murmured around us, teasing and casual.

Leah Clearwater’s eyes did not open. I thought I saw something sparkling on her cheek like a tear, but when I looked back a moment later it was gone.

Neither Jacob nor I spoke. He was so still beside me, his breath so deep and even, that I thought he might be close to sleep.

My mind was a thousand years away. I was not thinking of Yaha Uta or the other wolves, or the beautiful Cold Woman — I could picture her only too easily. No, I was thinking of someone outside the magic altogether. I was trying to imagine the face of the unnamed woman who had saved the entire tribe, the third wife.

Just a human woman, with no special gifts or powers. Physically weaker and slower than any of the monsters in the story. But she had been the key, the solution. She’d saved her husband, her young sons, her tribe.

I wish they'd remembered her name... .

Something shook my arm.

"C'mon, Bells," Jacob said in my ear. "We're here."

I blinked, confused because the fire seemed to have disappeared. I glared into the unexpected darkness, trying to make sense of my surroundings. It took me a minute to realize that I was no longer on the cliff. Jacob and I were alone. I was still under his arm, but I wasn't on the ground anymore.

How did I get in Jacob's car?

"Oh, crap!" I gasped as I realized that I had fallen asleep. "How late is it? Dang it, where's that stupid phone?" I patted my pockets, frantic and coming up empty.

"Easy. It's not even midnight yet. And I already called him for you. Look — he's waiting there."

"Midnight?" I repeated stupidly, still disoriented. I stared into the darkness, and my heartbeat picked up when my eyes made out the shape of the Volvo, thirty yards away. I reached for the door handle.

"Here," Jacob said, and he put a small shape into my other hand. The phone.

"You called Edward for me?"

My eyes were adjusted enough to see the bright gleam of Jacob's smile. "I figured if I played nice, I'd get more time with you."

"Thanks, Jake," I said, touched. "Really, thank you. And thanks for inviting me tonight. That was ..." Words failed me. "Wow. That was something else."

"And you didn't even stay up to watch me swallow a cow." He laughed. "No, I'm glad you liked it. It was ... nice for me. Having you there."

There was a movement in the dark distance — something pale ghosting against the black trees. Pacing?

"Yeah, he's not so patient, is he?" Jacob said, noticing my distraction. "Go ahead. But come back soon, okay?"

"Sure, Jake," I promised, cracking the car door open. Cold air washed across my legs and made me shiver.

"Sleep tight, Bells. Don't worry about anything — I'll be watching out for you tonight."

I paused, one foot on the ground. "No, Jake. Get some rest, I'll be fine."

"Sure, sure," he said, but he sounded more patronizing than agreeing.

"'Night, Jake. Thanks."

"'Night, Bella," he whispered as I hurried into the darkness.

Edward caught me at the boundary line.

"Bella," he said, relief strong in his voice; his arms wound tightly around me.

"Hi. Sorry I'm so late. I fell asleep and —"

“I know. Jacob explained.” He started toward the car, and I staggered woodenly at his side. “Are you tired? I could carry you.”

“I’m fine.”

“Let’s get you home and in bed. Did you have a nice time?”

“Yeah — it was amazing, Edward. I wish you could have come. I can’t even explain it. Jake’s dad told us the old legends and it was like … like magic.”

“You’ll have to tell me about it. After you’ve slept.”

“I won’t get it right,” I said, and then I yawned hugely.

Edward chuckled. He opened my door for me, lifted me in, and buckled my seat belt around me.

Bright lights flashed on and swept across us. I waved toward Jacob’s headlights, but I didn’t know if he saw the gesture.

That night — after I’d gotten past Charlie, who didn’t give me as much trouble as I’d expected because Jacob had called him, too — instead of collapsing in bed right away, I leaned out the open window while I waited for Edward to come back. The night was surprisingly cold, almost wintry. I hadn’t noticed it at all on the windy cliffs; I imagined that had less to do with the fire than it did with sitting next to Jacob.

Icy droplets spattered against my face as the rain began to fall.

It was too dark to see much besides the black triangles of the spruces leaning and shaking with the wind. But I strained my eyes anyway, searching for

other shapes in the storm. A pale silhouette, moving like a ghost through the black … or maybe the shadowy outline of an enormous wolf… . My eyes were too weak.

Then there was a movement in the night, right beside me. Edward slid through my open window, his hands colder than the rain.

“Is Jacob out there?” I asked, shivering as Edward pulled me into the circle of his arm.

“Yes … somewhere. And Esme’s on her way home.”

I sighed. “It’s so cold and wet. This is silly.” I shivered again.

He chuckled. “It’s only cold to you, Bella.”

It was cold in my dream that night, too, maybe because I slept in Edward’s arms. But I dreamt I was outside in the storm, the wind whipping my hair in my face and blinding my eyes. I stood on the rocky crescent of First Beach, trying to understand the quickly moving shapes I could only dimly see in the darkness at the shore’s edge. At first, there was nothing but a flash of white and black, darting toward each other and dancing away. And then, as if the moon had suddenly broken from the clouds, I could see everything.

Rosalie, her hair swinging wet and golden down to the back of her knees, was lunging at an enormous wolf — its muzzle shot through with silver — that I instinctively recognized as Billy Black.

I broke into a run, but found myself moving in the frustrating slow motion of dreamers. I tried to scream to them, to tell them to stop, but my voice was stolen

by the wind, and I could make no sound. I waved my arms, hoping to catch their attention. Something flashed in my hand, and I noticed for the first time that my right hand wasn't empty.

I held a long, sharp blade, ancient and silver, crusted in dried, blackened blood.

I cringed away from the knife, and my eyes snapped open to the quiet darkness of my bedroom. The first thing I realized was that I was not alone, and I turned to bury my face in Edward's chest, knowing the sweet scent of his skin would chase the nightmare away more effectively than anything else.

"Did I wake you?" he whispered. There was the sound of paper, the ruffling of pages, and a faint thump as something light fell to the wooden floor.

"No," I mumbled, sighing in contentment as his arms tightened around me. "I had a bad dream."

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

I shook my head. "Too tired. Maybe in the morning, if I remember."

I felt a silent laugh shake through him.

"In the morning," he agreed.

"What were you reading?" I muttered, not really awake at all.

"Wuthering Heights," he said.

I frowned sleepily. "I thought you didn't like that book."

"You left it out," he murmured, his soft voice lulling me toward unconsciousness. "Besides … the more time I spend with you, the more human emotions seem comprehensible to me. I'm discovering that I can sympathize with Heathcliff in ways I didn't think possible before."

"Mmm," I sighed.

He said something else, something low, but I was already asleep.

The next morning dawned pearl gray and still. Edward asked me about my dream, but I couldn't get a handle on it. I only remembered that I was cold, and that I was glad he was there when I woke up. He kissed me, long enough to get my pulse racing, and then headed home to change and get his car.

I dressed quickly, low on options. Whoever had ransacked my hamper had critically impaired my wardrobe. If it wasn't so frightening, it would be seriously annoying.

As I was about to head down for breakfast, I noticed my battered copy of Wuthering Heights lying open on the floor where Edward had dropped it in the night, holding his place the way the damaged binding always held mine.

I picked it up curiously, trying to remember what he'd said. Something about feeling sympathy for Heathcliff, of all people. That couldn't be right; I must have dreamed that part.

Three words on the open page caught my eye, and I bent my head to read the paragraph more closely. It was Heathcliff speaking, and I knew the passage well.

And there you see the distinction between our feelings: had he been in my place and I in his, though I hated him with a hatred that turned my life to gall, I never would have raised a hand against him. You may look incredulous, if you please! I never would have banished him from her society as long as she desired his. The moment her regard ceased, I would have torn his heart out, and drank his blood! But, till then — if you don't believe me, you don't know me — till then, I would have died by inches before I touched a single hair of his head!

The three words that had caught my eye were “drank his blood.”

I shuddered.

Yes, surely I must have dreamt that Edward said anything positive about Heathcliff. And this page was probably not the page he'd been reading. The book could have fallen open to any page.

# Chapter 12
## TIME

“I have foreseen ... ,” Alice began in an ominous tone.

Edward threw an elbow toward her ribs, which she neatly dodged.

“Fine,” she grumbled. “Edward is making me do this. But I did foresee that you would be more difficult if I surprised you.”

We were walking to the car after school, and I was completely clueless as to what she was talking about.

“In English?” I requested.

“Don’t be a baby about this. No tantrums.”

“Now I’m scared.”

“So you’re — I mean we’re — having a graduation party. It’s no big thing. Nothing to freak out over. But I saw that you would freak out if I tried to make it a surprise party” — she danced out of the way as Edward reached over to muss her hair — “and Edward said I had to tell you. But it’s nothing. Promise.”

I sighed heavily. “Is there any point in arguing?”

“None at all.”

“Okay, Alice. I’ll be there. And I’ll hate every minute of it. Promise.”

"That's the spirit! By the way, I love my gift. You shouldn't have."

"Alice, I didn't!"

"Oh, I know that. But you will."

I racked my brains in panic, trying to remember what I'd ever decided to get her for graduation that she might have seen.

"Amazing," Edward muttered. "How can someone so tiny be so annoying?"

Alice laughed. "It's a talent."

"Couldn't you have waited a few weeks to tell me about this?" I asked petulantly. "Now I'll just be stressed that much longer."

Alice frowned at me.

"Bella," she said slowly. "Do you know what day it is?"

"Monday?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yes. It is Monday … the fourth." She grabbed my elbow, spun me halfway around, and pointed toward a big yellow poster taped to the gym door. There, in sharp black letters, was the date of graduation. Exactly one week from today.

"It's the fourth? Of June? Are you sure?"

Neither one answered. Alice just shook her head sadly, feigning disappointment, and Edward's eyebrows lifted.

“It can’t be! How did that happen?” I tried to count backwards in my head, but I couldn’t figure out where the days had gone.

I felt like someone had kicked my legs out from under me. The weeks of stress, of worry ... somehow in the middle of all my obsessing over the time, my time had disappeared. My space for sorting through it all, for making plans, had vanished. I was out of time.

And I wasn’t ready.

I didn’t know how to do this. How to say goodbye to Charlie and Renée ... to Jacob ... to being human.

I knew exactly what I wanted, but I was suddenly terrified of getting it.

In theory, I was anxious, even eager to trade mortality for immortality. After all, it was the key to staying with Edward forever. And then there was the fact that I was being hunted by known and unknown parties. I’d rather not sit around, helpless and delicious, waiting for one of them to catch up with me.

In theory, that all made sense.

In practice ... being human was all I knew. The future beyond that was a big, dark abyss that I couldn’t know until I leaped into it.

This simple knowledge, today’s date — which was so obvious that I must have been subconsciously repressing it — made the deadline I’d been impatiently counting down toward feel like a date with the firing squad.

In a vague way, I was aware of Edward holding the car door for me, of Alice chattering from the backseat,

of the rain hammering against the windshield. Edward seemed to realize I was only there in body; he didn't try to pull me out of my abstraction. Or maybe he did, and I was past noticing.

We ended up at my house, where Edward led me to the sofa and pulled me down next to him. I stared out the window, into the liquid gray haze, and tried to find where my resolve had gone. Why was I panicking now? I'd known the deadline was coming. Why should it frighten me that it was here?

I don't know how long he let me stare out the window in silence. But the rain was disappearing into darkness when it was finally too much for him.

He put his cold hands on either side of my face and fixed his golden eyes on mine.

"Would you please tell me what you are thinking? Before I go mad?"

What could I say to him? That I was a coward? I searched for words.

"Your lips are white. Talk, Bella."

I exhaled in a big gust. How long had I been holding my breath?

"The date took me off guard," I whispered. "That's all."

He waited, his face full of worry and skepticism.

I tried to explain. "I'm not sure what to do … what to tell Charlie … what to say … how to …" My voice trailed off.

"This isn't about the party?"

I frowned. “No. But thanks for reminding me.”

The rain was louder as he read my face.

“You’re not ready,” he whispered.

“I am,” I lied immediately, a reflex reaction. I could tell he saw through it, so I took a deep breath, and told the truth. “I have to be.”

“You don’t have to be anything.”

I could feel the panic surfacing in my eyes as I mouthed the reasons. “Victoria, Jane, Caius, whoever was in my room … !”

“All the more reason to wait.”

“That doesn’t make any sense, Edward!”

He pressed his hands more tightly to my face and spoke with slow deliberation.

“Bella. Not one of us had a choice. You’ve seen what it’s done … to Rosalie especially. We’ve all struggled, trying to reconcile ourselves with something we had no control over. I won’t let it be that way for you. You will have a choice.”

“I’ve already made my choice.”

“You aren’t going through with this because a sword is hanging over your head. We will take care of the problems, and I will take care of you,” he vowed. “When we’re through it, and there is nothing forcing your hand, then you can decide to join me, if you still want to. But not because you’re afraid. You won’t be forced into this.”

"Carlisle promised," I mumbled, contrary out of habit. "After graduation."

"Not until you're ready," he said in a sure voice. "And definitely not while you feel threatened."

I didn't answer. I didn't have it in me to argue; I couldn't seem to find my commitment at the moment.

"There." He kissed my forehead. "Nothing to worry about."

I laughed a shaky laugh. "Nothing but impending doom."

"Trust me."

"I do."

He was still watching my face, waiting for me to relax.

"Can I ask you something?" I said.

"Anything."

I hesitated, biting my lip, and then asked a different question than the one I was worried about.

"What am I getting Alice for graduation?"

He snickered. "It looked like you were getting us both concert tickets —"

"That's right!" I was so relieved, I almost smiled. "The concert in Tacoma. I saw an ad in the paper last week, and I thought it would be something you'd like, since you said it was a good CD."

"It's a great idea. Thank you."

"I hope it's not sold out."

"It's the thought that counts. I ought to know."

I sighed.

"There's something else you meant to ask," he said.

I frowned. "You're good."

"I have lots of practice reading your face. Ask me."

I closed my eyes and leaned into him, hiding my face against his chest. "You don't want me to be a vampire."

"No, I don't," he said softly, and then he waited for more. "That's not a question," he prompted after a moment.

"Well … I was worrying about … why you feel that way."

"Worrying?" He picked out the word with surprise.

"Would you tell me why? The whole truth, not sparing my feelings?"

He hesitated for a minute. "If I answer your question, will you then explain your question?"

I nodded, my face still hidden.

He took a deep breath before he answered. "You could do so much better, Bella. I know that you believe I have a soul, but I'm not entirely convinced on that point, and to risk yours …" He shook his head slowly. "For me to allow this — to let you become what I am just so that I'll never have to lose you — is the most

selfish act I can imagine. I want it more than anything, for myself. But for you, I want so much more. Giving in — it feels criminal. It's the most selfish thing I'll ever do, even if I live forever.

"If there were any way for me to become human for you — no matter what the price was, I would pay it."

I sat very still, absorbing this.

Edward thought he was being selfish.

I felt the smile slowly spread across my face.

"So ... it's not that you're afraid you won't ... like me as much when I'm different — when I'm not soft and warm and I don't smell the same? You really do want to keep me, no matter how I turn out?"

He exhaled sharply. "You were worried I wouldn't like you?" he demanded. Then, before I could answer, he was laughing. "Bella, for a fairly intuitive person, you can be so obtuse!"

I knew he would think it silly, but I was relieved. If he really wanted me, I could get through the rest ... somehow. Selfish suddenly seemed like a beautiful word.

"I don't think you realize how much easier it will be for me, Bella," he said, the echo of his humor still there in his voice, "when I don't have to concentrate all the time on not killing you. Certainly, there are things I'll miss. This for one ..."

He stared into my eyes as he stroked my cheek, and I felt the blood rush up to color my skin. He laughed gently.

"And the sound of your heart," he continued, more serious but still smiling a little. "It's the most significant sound in my world. I'm so attuned to it now, I swear I could pick it out from miles away. But neither of these things matter. This," he said, taking my face in his hands. "You. That's what I'm keeping. You'll always be my Bella, you'll just be a little more durable."

I sighed and let my eyes close in contentment, resting there in his hands.

"Now will you answer a question for me? The whole truth, not sparing my feelings?" he asked.

"Of course," I answered at once, my eyes opening wide with surprise. What would he want to know?

He spoke the words slowly. "You don't want to be my wife."

My heart stopped, and then broke into a sprint. A cold sweat dewed on the back of my neck and my hands turned to ice.

He waited, watching and listening to my reaction.

"That's not a question," I finally whispered.

He looked down, his lashes casting long shadows across his cheekbones, and dropped his hands from my face to pick up my frozen left hand. He played with my fingers while he spoke.

"I was worrying about why you felt that way."

I tried to swallow. "That's not a question, either," I whispered.

"Please, Bella?"

"The truth?" I asked, only mouthing the words.

"Of course. I can take it, whatever it is."

I took a deep breath. "You're going to laugh at me."

His eyes flashed up to mine, shocked. "Laugh? I cannot imagine that."

"You'll see," I muttered, and then I sighed. My face went from white to scarlet in a sudden blaze of chagrin. "Okay, fine! I'm sure this will sound like some big joke to you, but really! It's just so ... so ... so embarrassing!" I confessed, and I hid my face against his chest again.

There was a brief pause.

"I'm not following you."

I tilted my head back and glared at him, embarrassment making me lash out, belligerent.

"I'm not that girl, Edward. The one who gets married right out of high school like some small-town hick who got knocked up by her boyfriend! Do you know what people would think? Do you realize what century this is? People don't just get married at eighteen! Not smart people, not responsible, mature people! I wasn't going to be that girl! That's not who I am... ." I trailed off, losing steam.

Edward's face was impossible to read as he thought through my answer.

"That's all?" he finally asked.

I blinked. “Isn’t that enough?”

“It’s not that you were … more eager for immortality itself than for just me?”

And then, though I’d predicted that he would laugh, I was suddenly the one having hysterics.

“Edward!” I gasped out between the paroxysms of giggles. “And here … I always … thought that … you were … so much … smarter than me!”

He took me in his arms, and I could feel that he was laughing with me.

“Edward,” I said, managing to speak more clearly with a little effort, “there’s no point to forever without you. I wouldn’t want one day without you.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” he said.

“Still … it doesn’t change anything.”

“It’s nice to understand, though. And I do understand your perspective, Bella, truly I do. But I’d like it very much if you’d try to consider mine.”

I’d sobered up by then, so I nodded and struggled to keep the frown off my face.

His liquid gold eyes turned hypnotic as they held mine.

“You see, Bella, I was always that boy. In my world, I was already a man. I wasn’t looking for love — no, I was far too eager to be a soldier for that; I thought of nothing but the idealized glory of the war that they were selling prospective draftees then — but if I had found …” He paused, cocking his head to the side. “I

was going to say if I had found someone, but that won't do. If I had found you, there isn't a doubt in my mind how I would have proceeded. I was that boy, who would have — as soon as I discovered that you were what I was looking for — gotten down on one knee and endeavored to secure your hand. I would have wanted you for eternity, even when the word didn't have quite the same connotations."

He smiled his crooked smile at me.

I stared at him with my eyes frozen wide.

"Breathe, Bella," he reminded me, smiling.

I breathed.

"Can you see my side, Bella, even a little bit?"

And for one second, I could. I saw myself in a long skirt and a high-necked lace blouse with my hair piled up on my head. I saw Edward looking dashing in a light suit with a bouquet of wildflowers in his hand, sitting beside me on a porch swing.

I shook my head and swallowed. I was just having Anne of Green Gables flashbacks.

"The thing is, Edward," I said in a shaky voice, avoiding the question, "in my mind, marriage and eternity are not mutually exclusive or mutually inclusive concepts. And since we're living in my world for the moment, maybe we should go with the times, if you know what I mean."

"But on the other hand," he countered, "you will soon be leaving time behind you altogether. So why should the transitory customs of one local culture affect the decision so much?"

I pursed my lips. “When in Rome?”

He laughed at me. “You don’t have to say yes or no today, Bella. It’s good to understand both sides, though, don’t you think?”

“So your condition ... ?”

“Is still in effect. I do see your point, Bella, but if you want me to change you myself... .”

“Dum, dum, dah-dum,” I hummed under my breath. I was going for the wedding march, but it sort of sounded like a dirge.

Time continued to move too fast.

That night flew by dreamlessly, and then it was morning and graduation was staring me in the face. I had a pile of studying to do for my finals that I knew I wouldn’t get halfway through in the few days I had left.

When I came down for breakfast, Charlie was already gone. He’d left the paper on the table, and that reminded me that I had some shopping to do. I hoped the ad for the concert was still running; I needed the phone number to get the stupid tickets. It didn’t seem like much of a gift now that all the surprise was gone. Of course, trying to surprise Alice wasn’t the brightest plan to begin with.

I meant to flip right back to the entertainment section, but the thick black headline caught my attention. I felt a thrill of fear as I leaned closer to read the front-page story.

SEATTLE TERRORIZED BY SLAYINGS

It's been less than a decade since the city of Seattle was the hunting ground for the most prolific serial killer in U.S. history. Gary Ridgway, the Green River Killer, was convicted of the murders of 48 women.

And now a beleaguered Seattle must face the possibility that it could be harboring an even more horrifying monster at this very moment.

The police are not calling the recent rash of homicides and disappearances the work of a serial killer. Not yet, at least. They are reluctant to believe so much carnage could be the work of one individual. This killer — if, in fact, it is one person — would then be responsible for 39 linked homicides and disappearances within the last three months alone. In comparison, Ridgway's 48-count murder spree was scattered over a 21-year period. If these deaths can be linked to one man, then this is the most violent rampage of serial murder in American history.

The police are leaning instead toward the theory that gang activity is involved. This theory is supported by the sheer number of victims, and by the fact that there seems to be no pattern in the choice of victims.

From Jack the Ripper to Ted Bundy, the targets of serial killings are usually connected by similarities in age, gender, race, or a combination of the three. The victims of this crime wave range in age from 15-year-old honor student Amanda Reed, to 67-year-old retired postman Omar Jenks. The linked deaths include a nearly even 18 women and 21 men. The victims are racially diverse: Caucasians, African Americans, Hispanics and Asians.

The selection appears random. The motive seems to be killing for no other reason than to kill.

So why even consider the idea of a serial killer?

There are enough similarities in the modus operandi to rule out unrelated crimes. Every victim discovered has been burned to the extent that dental records were necessary for identification. The use of some kind of accelerant, like gasoline or alcohol, seems to be indicated in the conflagrations; however, no traces of any accelerant have yet been found. All of the bodies have been carelessly dumped with no attempt at concealment.

More gruesome yet, most of the remains show evidence of brutal violence — bones crushed and snapped by some kind of tremendous pressure — which medical examiners believe occurred before the time of death, though these conclusions are difficult to be sure of, considering the state of the evidence.

Another similarity that points to the possibility of a serial: every crime is perfectly clean of evidence, aside from the remains themselves. Not a fingerprint, not a tire tread mark nor a foreign hair is left behind. There have been no sightings of any suspect in the disappearances.

Then there are the disappearances themselves — hardly low profile by any means. None of the victims are what could be viewed as easy targets. None are runaways or the homeless, who vanish so easily and are seldom reported missing. Victims have vanished from their homes, from a fourth-story apartment, from a health club, from a wedding reception. Perhaps the most astounding: 30-year-old amateur boxer Robert Walsh entered a movie theater with a date; a few minutes into the movie, the woman realized that he was not in his seat. His body was found only three hours later when fire fighters were

called to the scene of a burning trash Dumpster, twenty miles away.

Another pattern is present in the slayings: all of the victims disappeared at night.

And the most alarming pattern? Acceleration. Six of the homicides were committed in the first month, 11 in the second. Twenty-two have occurred in the last 10 days alone. And the police are no closer to finding the responsible party than they were after the first charred body was discovered.

The evidence is conflicting, the pieces horrifying. A vicious new gang or a wildly active serial killer? Or something else the police haven't yet conceived of?

Only one conclusion is indisputable: something hideous is stalking Seattle.

It took me three tries to read the last sentence, and I realized the problem was my shaking hands.

"Bella?"

Focused as I was, Edward's voice, though quiet and not totally unexpected, made me gasp and whirl.

He was leaning in the doorway, his eyebrows pulled together. Then he was suddenly at my side, taking my hand.

"Did I startle you? I'm sorry. I did knock... ."

"No, no," I said quickly. "Have you seen this?" I pointed to the paper.

A frown creased his forehead.

"I hadn't seen today's news yet. But I knew it was getting worse. We're going to have to do something … quickly."

I didn't like that. I hated any of them taking chances, and whatever or whoever was in Seattle was truly beginning to frighten me. But the idea of the Volturi coming was just as scary.

"What does Alice say?"

"That's the problem." His frown hardened. "She can't see anything … though we've made up our minds half a dozen times to check it out. She's starting to lose confidence. She feels like she's missing too much these days, that something's wrong. That maybe her vision is slipping away."

My eyes were wide. "Can that happen?"

"Who knows? No one's ever done a study … but I really doubt it. These things tend to intensify over time. Look at Aro and Jane."

"Then what's wrong?"

"Self-fulfilling prophecy, I think. We keep waiting for Alice to see something so we can go … and she doesn't see anything because we won't really go until she does. So she can't see us there. Maybe we'll have to do it blind."

I shuddered. "No."

"Did you have a strong desire to attend class today? We're only a couple of days from finals; they won't be giving us anything new."

"I think I can live without school for a day. What are we doing?"

"I want to talk to Jasper."

Jasper, again. It was strange. In the Cullen family, Jasper was always a little on the fringe, part of things but never the center of them. It was my unspoken assumption that he was only there for Alice. I had the sense that he would follow Alice anywhere, but that this lifestyle was not his first choice. The fact that he was less committed to it than the others was probably why he had more difficulty keeping it up.

At any rate, I'd never seen Edward feel dependent on Jasper. I wondered again what he'd meant about Jasper's expertise. I really didn't know much about Jasper's history, just that he had come from somewhere in the south before Alice found him. For some reason, Edward had always shied away from any questions about his newest brother. And I'd always been too intimidated by the tall, blond vampire who looked like a brooding movie star to ask him outright.

When we got to the house, we found Carlisle, Esme, and Jasper watching the news intently, though the sound was so low that it was unintelligible to me. Alice was perched on the bottom step of the grand staircase, her face in her hands and her expression discouraged. As we walked in, Emmett ambled through the kitchen door, seeming perfectly at ease. Nothing ever bothered Emmett.

"Hey, Edward. Ditching, Bella?" He grinned at me.

"We both are," Edward reminded him.

Emmett laughed. “Yes, but it’s her first time through high school. She might miss something.”

Edward rolled his eyes, but otherwise ignored his favorite brother. He tossed the paper to Carlisle.

“Did you see that they’re considering a serial killer now?” he asked.

Carlisle sighed. “They’ve had two specialists debating that possibility on CNN all morning.”

“We can’t let this go on.”

“Let’s go now,” Emmett said with sudden enthusiasm. “I’m dead bored.”

A hiss echoed down the stairway from upstairs.

“She’s such a pessimist,” Emmett muttered to himself.

Edward agreed with Emmett. “We’ll have to go sometime.”

Rosalie appeared at the top of the stairs and descended slowly. Her face was smooth, expressionless.

Carlisle was shaking his head. “I’m concerned. We’ve never involved ourselves in this kind of thing before. It’s not our business. We aren’t the Volturi.”

“I don’t want the Volturi to have to come here,” Edward said. “It gives us so much less reaction time.”

“And all those innocent humans in Seattle,” Esme murmured. “It’s not right to let them die this way.”

"I know," Carlisle sighed.

"Oh," Edward said sharply, turning his head slightly to look at Jasper. "I didn't think of that. I see. You're right, that has to be it. Well, that changes everything."

I wasn't the only one who stared at him in confusion, but I might have been the only one who didn't look slightly annoyed.

"I think you'd better explain to the others," Edward said to Jasper. "What could be the purpose of this?" Edward started to pace, staring at the floor, lost in thought.

I hadn't seen her get up, but Alice was there beside me. "What is he rambling about?" she asked Jasper. "What are you thinking?"

Jasper didn't seem to enjoy the spotlight. He hesitated, reading every face in the circle — for everyone had moved in to hear what he would say — and then his eyes paused on my face.

"You're confused," he said to me, his deep voice very quiet.

There was no question in his assumption. Jasper knew what I was feeling, what everyone was feeling.

"We're all confused," Emmett grumbled.

"You can afford the time to be patient," Jasper told him. "Bella should understand this, too. She's one of us now."

His words took me by surprise. As little as I'd had to do with Jasper, especially since my last birthday

when he'd tried to kill me, I hadn't realize that he thought of me that way.

"How much do you know about me, Bella?" Jasper asked.

Emmett sighed theatrically, and plopped down on the couch to wait with exaggerated impatience.

"Not much," I admitted.

Jasper stared at Edward, who looked up to meet his gaze.

"No," Edward answered his thought. "I'm sure you can understand why I haven't told her that story. But I suppose she needs to hear it now."

Jasper nodded thoughtfully, and then started to roll up the arm of his ivory sweater.

I watched, curious and confused, trying to figure out what he was doing. He held his wrist under the edge of the lampshade beside him, close to the light of the naked bulb, and traced his finger across a raised crescent mark on the pale skin.

It took me a minute to understand why the shape looked strangely familiar.

"Oh," I breathed as realization hit. "Jasper, you have a scar exactly like mine."

I held out my hand, the silvery crescent more prominent against my cream skin than against his alabaster.

Jasper smiled faintly. "I have a lot of scars like yours, Bella."

Jasper's face was unreadable as he pushed the sleeve of his thin sweater higher up his arm. At first my eyes could not make sense of the texture that was layered thickly across the skin. Curved half-moons crisscrossed in a feathery pattern that was only visible, white on white as it was, because the bright glow of the lamp beside him threw the slightly raised design into relief, with shallow shadows outlining the shapes. And then I grasped that the pattern was made of individual crescents like the one on his wrist … the one on my hand.

I looked back at my own small, solitary scar — and remembered how I'd received it. I stared at the shape of James's teeth, embossed forever on my skin.

And then I gasped, staring up at him. "Jasper, what happened to you?"

# Chapter 13

## NEWBORN

"The same thing that happened to your hand," Jasper answered in a quiet voice. "Repeated a thousand times." He laughed a little ruefully and brushed at his arm. "Our venom is the only thing that leaves a scar."

"Why?" I breathed in horror, feeling rude but unable to stop staring at his subtly ravaged skin.

"I didn't have quite the same ... upbringing as my adopted siblings here. My beginning was something else entirely." His voice turned hard as he finished.

I gaped at him, appalled.

"Before I tell you my story," Jasper said, "you must understand that there are places in our world, Bella, where the life span of the never-aging is measured in weeks, and not centuries."

The others had heard this before. Carlisle and Emmett turned their attention to the TV again. Alice moved silently to sit at Esme's feet. But Edward was just as absorbed as I was; I could feel his eyes on my face, reading every flicker of emotion.

"To really understand why, you have to look at the world from a different perspective. You have to imagine the way it looks to the powerful, the greedy ... the perpetually thirsty.

"You see, there are places in this world that are more desirable to us than others. Places where we can be less restrained, and still avoid detection.

"Picture, for instance, a map of the western hemisphere. Picture on it every human life as a small red dot. The thicker the red, the more easily we — well, those who exist this way — can feed without attracting notice."

I shuddered at the image in my head, at the word feed. But Jasper wasn't worried about frightening me, not overprotective like Edward always was. He went on without a pause.

"Not that the covens in the South care much for what the humans notice or do not. It's the Volturi that keep them in check. They are the only ones the southern covens fear. If not for the Volturi, the rest of us would be quickly exposed."

I frowned at the way he pronounced the name — with respect, almost gratitude. The idea of the Volturi as the good guys in any sense was hard to accept.

"The North is, by comparison, very civilized. Mostly we are nomads here who enjoy the day as well as the night, who allow humans to interact with us unsuspectingly — anonymity is important to us all.

"It's a different world in the South. The immortals there come out only at night. They spend the day plotting their next move, or anticipating their enemy's. Because it has been war in the South, constant war for centuries, with never one moment of truce. The covens there barely note the existence of humans, except as soldiers notice a herd of cows by the wayside — food for the taking. They only hide from the notice of the herd because of the Volturi."

"But what are they fighting for?" I asked.

Jasper smiled. “Remember the map with the red dots?”

He waited, so I nodded.

“They fight for control of the thickest red.

“You see, it occurred to someone once that, if he were the only vampire in, let’s say Mexico City, well then, he could feed every night, twice, three times, and no one would ever notice. He plotted ways to get rid of the competition.

“Others had the same idea. Some came up with more effective tactics than others.

“But the most effective tactic was invented by a fairly young vampire named Benito. The first anyone ever heard of him, he came down from somewhere north of Dallas and massacred the two small covens that shared the area near Houston. Two nights later, he took on the much stronger clan of allies that claimed Monterrey in northern Mexico. Again, he won.”

“How did he win?” I asked with wary curiosity.

“Benito had created an army of newborn vampires. He was the first one to think of it, and, in the beginning, he was unstoppable. Very young vampires are volatile, wild, and almost impossible to control. One newborn can be reasoned with, taught to restrain himself, but ten, fifteen together are a nightmare. They’ll turn on each other as easily as on the enemy you point them at. Benito had to keep making more as they fought amongst themselves, and as the covens he decimated took more than half his force down before they lost.

"You see, though newborns are dangerous, they are still possible to defeat if you know what you're doing. They're incredibly powerful physically, for the first year or so, and if they're allowed to bring strength to bear they can crush an older vampire with ease. But they are slaves to their instincts, and thus predictable. Usually, they have no skill in fighting, only muscle and ferocity. And in this case, overwhelming numbers."

"The vampires in southern Mexico realized what was coming for them, and they did the only thing they could think of to counteract Benito. They made armies of their own… .

"All hell broke loose — and I mean that more literally than you can possibly imagine. We immortals have our histories, too, and this particular war will never be forgotten. Of course, it was not a good time to be human in Mexico, either."

I shuddered.

"When the body count reached epidemic proportions — in fact, your histories blame a disease for the population slump — the Volturi finally stepped in. The entire guard came together and sought out every newborn in the bottom half of North America. Benito was entrenched in Puebla, building his army as quickly as he could in order to take on the prize — Mexico City. The Volturi started with him, and then moved on to the rest.

"Anyone who was found with the newborns was executed immediately, and, since everyone was trying to protect themselves from Benito, Mexico was emptied of vampires for a time.

“The Volturi were cleaning house for almost a year. This was another chapter of our history that will always be remembered, though there were very few witnesses left to speak of what it was like. I spoke to someone once who had, from a distance, watched what happened when they visited Culiacán.”

Jasper shuddered. I realized that I had never before seen him either afraid or horrified. This was a first.

“It was enough that the fever for conquest did not spread from the South. The rest of the world stayed sane. We owe the Volturi for our present way of life.

“But when the Volturi went back to Italy, the survivors were quick to stake their claims in the South.

“It didn’t take long before covens began to dispute again. There was a lot of bad blood, if you’ll forgive the expression. Vendettas abounded. The idea of newborns was already there, and some were not able to resist. However, the Volturi had not been forgotten, and the southern covens were more careful this time. The newborns were selected from the human pool with more care, and given more training. They were used circumspectly, and the humans remained, for the most part, oblivious. Their creators gave the Volturi no reason to return.

“The wars resumed, but on a smaller scale. Every now and then, someone would go too far, speculation would begin in the human newspapers, and the Volturi would return and clean out the city. But they let the others, the careful ones, continue… .”

Jasper was staring off into space.

"That's how you were changed." My realization was a whisper.

"Yes," he agreed. "When I was human, I lived in Houston, Texas. I was almost seventeen years old when I joined the Confederate Army in 1861. I lied to the recruiters and told them I was twenty. I was tall enough to get away with it.

"My military career was short-lived, but very promising. People always ... liked me, listened to what I had to say. My father said it was charisma. Of course, now I know it was probably something more. But, whatever the reason, I was promoted quickly through the ranks, over older, more experienced men. The Confederate Army was new and scrambling to organize itself, so that provided opportunities, as well. By the first battle of Galveston — well, it was more of a skirmish, really — I was the youngest major in Texas, not even acknowledging my real age.

"I was placed in charge of evacuating the women and children from the city when the Union's mortar boats reached the harbor. It took a day to prepare them, and then I left with the first column of civilians to convey them to Houston.

"I remember that one night very clearly.

"We reached the city after dark. I stayed only long enough to make sure the entire party was safely situated. As soon as that was done, I got myself a fresh horse, and I headed back to Galveston. There wasn't time to rest.

"Just a mile outside the city, I found three women on foot. I assumed they were stragglers and dismounted at once to offer them my aid. But, when I could see their faces in the dim light of the moon, I was

stunned into silence. They were, without question, the three most beautiful women I had ever seen.

“They had such pale skin, I remember marveling at it. Even the little black-haired girl, whose features were clearly Mexican, was porcelain in the moonlight. They seemed young, all of them, still young enough to be called girls. I knew they were not lost members of our party. I would have remembered seeing these three.

“‘He’s speechless,’ the tallest girl said in a lovely, delicate voice — it was like wind chimes. She had fair hair, and her skin was snow white.

“The other was blonder still, her skin just as chalky. Her face was like an angel’s. She leaned toward me with half-closed eyes and inhaled deeply.

“‘Mmm,’ she sighed. ‘Lovely.’

“The small one, the tiny brunette, put her hand on the girl’s arm and spoke quickly. Her voice was too soft and musical to be sharp, but that seemed to be the way she intended it.

“‘Concentrate, Nettie,’ she said.

“I’d always had a good sense of how people related to each other, and it was immediately clear that the brunette was somehow in charge of the others. If they’d been military, I would have said that she outranked them.

“‘He looks right — young, strong, an officer… . ’ The brunette paused, and I tried unsuccessfully to speak. ‘And there’s something more … do you sense it?’ she asked the other two. ‘He’s … compelling.’

"'Oh, yes,' Nettie quickly agreed, leaning toward me again.

"'Patience,' the brunette cautioned her. 'I want to keep this one.'

"Nettie frowned; she seemed annoyed.

"'You'd better do it, Maria,' the taller blonde spoke again. 'If he's important to you. I kill them twice as often as I keep them.'

"'Yes, I'll do it,' Maria agreed. 'I really do like this one. Take Nettie away, will you? I don't want to have to protect my back while I'm trying to focus.'

"My hair was standing up on the back of my neck, though I didn't understand the meaning of anything the beautiful creatures were saying. My instincts told me that there was danger, that the angel had meant it when she spoke of killing, but my judgment overruled my instincts. I had not been taught to fear women, but to protect them.

"'Let's hunt,' Nettie agreed enthusiastically, reaching for the tall girl's hand. They wheeled — they were so graceful! — and sprinted toward the city. They seemed to almost take flight, they were so fast — their white dresses blew out behind them like wings. I blinked in amazement, and they were gone.

"I turned to stare at Maria, who was watching me curiously.

"I'd never been superstitious in my life. Until that second, I'd never believed in ghosts or any other such nonsense. Suddenly, I was unsure.

"'What is your name, soldier?' Maria asked me.

“‘Major Jasper Whitlock, ma’am,’ I stammered, unable to be impolite to a female, even if she was a ghost.

“‘I truly hope you survive, Jasper,’ she said in her gentle voice. ‘I have a good feeling about you.’

“She took a step closer, and inclined her head as if she were going to kiss me. I stood frozen in place, though my instincts were screaming at me to run.”

Jasper paused, his face thoughtful. “A few days later,” he finally said, and I wasn’t sure if he had edited his story for my sake or because he was responding to the tension that even I could feel exuding from Edward, “I was introduced to my new life.

“Their names were Maria, Nettie, and Lucy. They hadn’t been together long — Maria had rounded up the other two — all three were survivors of recently lost battles. Theirs was a partnership of convenience. Maria wanted revenge, and she wanted her territories back. The others were eager to increase their ... herd lands, I suppose you could say. They were putting together an army, and going about it more carefully than was usual. It was Maria’s idea. She wanted a superior army, so she sought out specific humans who had potential. Then she gave us much more attention, more training than anyone else had bothered with. She taught us to fight, and she taught us to be invisible to the humans. When we did well, we were rewarded... .”

He paused, editing again.

“She was in a hurry, though. Maria knew that the massive strength of the newborn began to wane around the year mark, and she wanted to act while we were strong.

“There were six of us when I joined Maria’s band. She added four more within a fortnight. We were all male — Maria wanted soldiers — and that made it slightly more difficult to keep from fighting amongst ourselves. I fought my first battles against my new comrades in arms. I was quicker than the others, better at combat. Maria was pleased with me, though put out that she had to keep replacing the ones I destroyed. I was rewarded often, and that made me stronger.

“Maria was a good judge of character. She decided to put me in charge of the others — as if I were being promoted. It suited my nature exactly. The casualties went down dramatically, and our numbers swelled to hover around twenty.

“This was considerable for the cautious times we lived in. My ability, as yet undefined, to control the emotional atmosphere around me was vitally effective. We soon began to work together in a way that newborn vampires had never cooperated before. Even Maria, Nettie, and Lucy were able to work together more easily.

“Maria grew quite fond of me — she began to depend upon me. And, in some ways, I worshipped the ground she walked on. I had no idea that any other life was possible. Maria told us this was the way things were, and we believed.

“She asked me to tell her when my brothers and I were ready to fight, and I was eager to prove myself. I pulled together an army of twenty-three in the end — twenty-three unbelievably strong new vampires, organized and skilled as no others before. Maria was ecstatic.

"We crept down toward Monterrey, her former home, and she unleashed us on her enemies. They had only nine newborns at the time, and a pair of older vampires controlling them. We took them down more easily than Maria could believe, losing only four in the process. It was an unheard-of margin of victory.

"And we were well trained. We did it without attracting notice. The city changed hands without any human being aware.

"Success made Maria greedy. It wasn't long before she began to eye other cities. That first year, she extended her control to cover most of Texas and northern Mexico. Then the others came from the South to dislodge her."

He brushed two fingers along the faint pattern of scars on his arm.

"The fighting was intense. Many began to worry that the Volturi would return. Of the original twenty-three, I was the only one to survive the first eighteen months. We both won and lost. Nettie and Lucy turned on Maria eventually — but that one we won.

"Maria and I were able to hold on to Monterrey. It quieted a little, though the wars continued. The idea of conquest was dying out; it was mostly vengeance and feuding now. So many had lost their partners, and that is something our kind does not forgive... .

"Maria and I always kept a dozen or so newborns ready. They meant little to us — they were pawns, they were disposable. When they outgrew their usefulness, we did dispose of them. My life continued in the same violent pattern and the years passed. I was sick of it all for a very long time before anything changed ...

“Decades later, I developed a friendship with a newborn who’d remained useful and survived his first three years, against the odds. His name was Peter. I liked Peter; he was … civilized — I suppose that’s the right word. He didn’t enjoy the fight, though he was good at it.

“He was assigned to deal with the newborns — babysit them, you could say. It was a full-time job.

“And then it was time to purge again. The newborns were outgrowing their strength; they were due to be replaced. Peter was supposed to help me dispose of them. We took them aside individually, you see, one by one … It was always a very long night. This time, he tried to convince me that a few had potential, but Maria had instructed that we get rid of them all. I told him no.

“We were about halfway through, and I could feel that it was taking a great toll on Peter. I was trying to decide whether or not I should send him away and finish up myself as I called out the next victim. To my surprise, he was suddenly angry, furious. I braced for whatever his mood might foreshadow — he was a good fighter, but he was never a match for me.

“The newborn I’d summoned was a female, just past her year mark. Her name was Charlotte. His feelings changed when she came into view; they gave him away. He yelled for her to run, and he bolted after her. I could have pursued them, but I didn’t. I felt … averse to destroying him.

“Maria was irritated with me for that …

“Five years later, Peter snuck back for me. He picked a good day to arrive.

“Maria was mystified by my ever-deteriorating frame of mind. She’d never felt a moment’s depression, and I wondered why I was different. I began to notice a change in her emotions when she was near me — sometimes there was fear … and malice — the same feelings that had given me advance warning when Nettie and Lucy struck. I was preparing myself to destroy my only ally, the core of my existence, when Peter returned.

“Peter told me about his new life with Charlotte, told me about options I’d never dreamed I had. In five years, they’d never had a fight, though they’d met many others in the north. Others who could co-exist without the constant mayhem.

“In one conversation, he had me convinced. I was ready to go, and somewhat relieved I wouldn’t have to kill Maria. I’d been her companion for as many years as Carlisle and Edward have been together, yet the bond between us was nowhere near as strong. When you live for the fight, for the blood, the relationships you form are tenuous and easily broken. I walked away without a backward glance.

“I traveled with Peter and Charlotte for a few years, getting the feel of this new, more peaceful world. But the depression didn’t fade. I didn’t understand what was wrong with me, until Peter noticed that it was always worse after I’d hunted.

“I contemplated that. In so many years of slaughter and carnage, I’d lost nearly all of my humanity. I was undeniably a nightmare, a monster of the grisliest kind. Yet each time I found another human victim, I would feel a faint prick of remembrance for that other life. Watching their eyes widen in wonder at my beauty, I could see Maria and the others in my head, what they had looked like to me the last night that I

was Jasper Whitlock. It was stronger for me — this borrowed memory — than it was for anyone else, because I could feel everything my prey was feeling. And I lived their emotions as I killed them.

“You’ve experienced the way I can manipulate the emotions around myself, Bella, but I wonder if you realize how the feelings in a room affect me. I live every day in a climate of emotion. For the first century of my life, I lived in a world of bloodthirsty vengeance. Hate was my constant companion. It eased some when I left Maria, but I still had to feel the horror and fear of my prey.

“It began to be too much.

“The depression got worse, and I wandered away from Peter and Charlotte. Civilized as they were, they didn’t feel the same aversion I was beginning to feel. They only wanted peace from the fight. I was so wearied by killing — killing anyone, even mere humans.

“Yet I had to keep killing. What choice did I have? I tried to kill less often, but I would get too thirsty and I would give in. After a century of instant gratification, I found self-discipline … challenging. I still haven’t perfected that.”

Jasper was lost in the story, as was I. It surprised me when his desolate expression smoothed into a peaceful smile.

“I was in Philadelphia. There was a storm, and I was out during the day — something I was not completely comfortable with yet. I knew standing in the rain would attract attention, so I ducked into a little half-empty diner. My eyes were dark enough that no one would notice them, though this meant I was thirsty, and that worried me a little.

"She was there — expecting me, naturally." He chuckled once. "She hopped down from the high stool at the counter as soon as I walked in and came directly toward me.

"It shocked me. I was not sure if she meant to attack. That's the only interpretation of her behavior my past had to offer. But she was smiling. And the emotions that were emanating from her were like nothing I'd ever felt before.

"'You've kept me waiting a long time,' she said."

I didn't realize Alice had come to stand behind me again.

"And you ducked your head, like a good Southern gentleman, and said, 'I'm sorry, ma'am.'" Alice laughed at the memory.

Jasper smiled down at her. "You held out your hand, and I took it without stopping to make sense of what I was doing. For the first time in almost a century, I felt hope."

Jasper took Alice's hand as he spoke.

Alice grinned. "I was just relieved. I thought you were never going to show up."

They smiled at each other for a long moment, and then Jasper looked back to me, the soft expression lingering.

"Alice told me what she'd seen of Carlisle and his family. I could hardly believe that such an existence was possible. But Alice made me optimistic. So we went to find them."

“Scared the hell out of them, too,” Edward said, rolling his eyes at Jasper before turning to me to explain. “Emmett and I were away hunting. Jasper shows up, covered in battle scars, towing this little freak” — he nudged Alice playfully — “who greets them all by name, knows everything about them, and wants to know which room she can move into.”

Alice and Jasper laughed in harmony, soprano and bass.

“When I got home, all my things were in the garage,” Edward continued.

Alice shrugged. “Your room had the best view.”

They all laughed together now.

“That’s a nice story,” I said.

Three pairs of eyes questioned my sanity.

“I mean the last part,” I defended myself. “The happy ending with Alice.”

“Alice has made all the difference,” Jasper agreed. “This is a climate I enjoy.”

But the momentary pause in the stress couldn’t last.

“An army,” Alice whispered. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

The others were intent again, their eyes locked on Jasper’s face.

“I thought I must be interpreting the signs incorrectly. Because where is the motive? Why would someone create an army in Seattle? There is no history there, no vendetta. It makes no sense from a conquest

standpoint, either; no one claims it. Nomads pass through, but there's no one to fight for it. No one to defend it from.

"But I've seen this before, and there's no other explanation. There is an army of newborn vampires in Seattle. Fewer than twenty, I'd guess. The difficult part is that they are totally untrained. Whoever made them just set them loose. It will only get worse, and it won't be much longer till the Volturi step in. Actually, I'm surprised they've let this go on so long."

"What can we do?" Carlisle asked.

"If we want to avoid the Volturi's involvement, we will have to destroy the newborns, and we will have to do it very soon." Jasper's face was hard. Knowing his story now, I could guess how this evaluation must disturb him. "I can teach you how. It won't be easy in the city. The young ones aren't concerned about secrecy, but we will have to be. It will limit us in ways that they are not. Maybe we can lure them out."

"Maybe we won't have to." Edward's voice was bleak. "Does it occur to anyone else that the only possible threat in the area that would call for the creation of an army is ... us?"

Jasper's eyes narrowed; Carlisle's widened, shocked.

"Tanya's family is also near," Esme said slowly, unwilling to accept Edward's words.

"The newborns aren't ravaging Anchorage, Esme. I think we have to consider the idea that we are the targets."

"They're not coming after us," Alice insisted, and then paused. "Or ... they don't know that they are. Not yet."

"What is that?" Edward asked, curious and tense. "What are you remembering?"

"Flickers," Alice said. "I can't see a clear picture when I try to see what's going on, nothing concrete. But I've been getting these strange flashes. Not enough to make sense of. It's as if someone's changing their mind, moving from one course of action to another so quickly that I can't get a good view... ."

"Indecision?" Jasper asked in disbelief.

"I don't know... ."

"Not indecision," Edward growled. "Knowledge. Someone who knows you can't see anything until the decision is made. Someone who is hiding from us. Playing with the holes in your vision."

"Who would know that?" Alice whispered.

Edward's eyes were hard as ice. "Aro knows you as well as you know yourself."

"But I would see if they'd decided to come... ."

"Unless they didn't want to get their hands dirty."

"A favor," Rosalie suggested, speaking for the first time. "Someone in the South ... someone who already had trouble with the rules. Someone who should have been destroyed is offered a second chance — if they take care of this one small problem... . That would explain the Volturi's sluggish response."

“Why?” Carlisle asked, still shocked. “There’s no reason for the Volturi —”

“It was there,” Edward disagreed quietly. “I’m surprised it’s come to this so soon, because the other thoughts were stronger. In Aro’s head he saw me at his one side and Alice at his other. The present and the future, virtual omniscience. The power of the idea intoxicated him. I would have thought it would take him much longer to give up on that plan — he wanted it too much. But there was also the thought of you, Carlisle, of our family, growing stronger and larger. The jealousy and the fear: you having … not more than he had, but still, things that he wanted. He tried not to think about it, but he couldn’t hide it completely. The idea of rooting out the competition was there; besides their own, ours is the largest coven they’ve ever found… .”

I stared at his face in horror. He’d never told me this, but I guessed I knew why. I could see it in my head now, Aro’s dream. Edward and Alice in black, flowing robes, drifting along at Aro’s side with their eyes cold and blood-red… .

Carlisle interrupted my waking nightmare. “They’re too committed to their mission. They would never break the rules themselves. It goes against everything they’ve worked for.”

“They’ll clean up afterward. A double betrayal,” Edward said in a grim voice. “No harm done.”

Jasper leaned forward, shaking his head. “No, Carlisle is right. The Volturi do not break rules. Besides, it’s much too sloppy. This … person, this threat — they have no idea what they’re doing. A first-timer, I’d swear to it. I cannot believe the Volturi are involved. But they will be.”

They all stared at each other, frozen with stress.

“Then let’s go,” Emmett almost roared. “What are we waiting for?”

Carlisle and Edward exchanged a long glance. Edward nodded once.

“We’ll need you to teach us, Jasper,” Carlisle finally said. “How to destroy them.” Carlisle’s jaw was hard, but I could see the pain in his eyes as he said the words. No one hated violence more than Carlisle.

There was something bothering me, and I couldn’t put my finger on it. I was numb, horrified, deathly afraid. And yet, under that, I could feel that I was missing something important. Something that would make some sense out of the chaos. That would explain it.

“We’re going to need help,” Jasper said. “Do you think Tanya’s family would be willing … ? Another five mature vampires would make an enormous difference. And then Kate and Eleazar would be especially advantageous on our side. It would be almost easy, with their aid.”

“We’ll ask,” Carlisle answered.

Jasper held out a cell phone. “We need to hurry.”

I’d never seen Carlisle’s innate calm so shaken. He took the phone, and paced toward the windows. He dialed a number, held the phone to his ear, and laid the other hand against the glass. He stared out into the foggy morning with a pained and ambivalent expression.

Edward took my hand and pulled me to the white loveseat. I sat beside him, staring at his face while he stared at Carlisle.

Carlisle's voice was low and quick, difficult to hear. I heard him greet Tanya, and then he raced through the situation too fast for me to understand much, though I could tell that the Alaskan vampires were not ignorant of what was going on in Seattle.

Then something changed in Carlisle's voice.

"Oh," he said, his voice sharper in surprise. "We didn't realize … that Irina felt that way."

Edward groaned at my side and closed his eyes. "Damn it. Damn Laurent to the deepest pit of hell where he belongs."

"Laurent?" I whispered, the blood emptying from my face, but Edward didn't respond, focused on Carlisle's thoughts.

My short encounter with Laurent early this spring was not something that had faded or dimmed in my mind. I still remembered every word he'd said before Jacob and his pack had interrupted.

I actually came here as a favor to her… .

Victoria. Laurent had been her first maneuver — she'd sent him to observe, to see how hard it might be to get to me. He hadn't survived the wolves to report back.

Though he'd kept up his old ties with Victoria after James's death, he'd also formed new ties and new relationships. He'd gone to live with Tanya's family in Alaska — Tanya the strawberry blonde — the closest

friends the Cullens had in the vampire world, practically extended family. Laurent had been with them for almost a year previous to his death.

Carlisle was still talking, his voice not quite pleading. Persuasive, but with an edge. Then the edge abruptly won out over the persuasion.

“There’s no question of that,” Carlisle said in a stern voice. “We have a truce. They haven’t broken it, and neither will we. I’m sorry to hear that… . Of course. We’ll just have to do our best alone.”

Carlisle shut the phone without waiting for an answer. He continued to stare out into the fog.

“What’s the problem?” Emmett murmured to Edward.

“Irina was more involved with our friend Laurent than we knew. She’s holding a grudge against the wolves for destroying him to save Bella. She wants —” He paused, looking down at me.

“Go on,” I said as evenly as I could.

His eyes tightened. “She wants revenge. To take down the pack. They would trade their help for our permission.”

“No!” I gasped.

“Don’t worry,” he told me in a flat voice. “Carlisle would never agree to it.” He hesitated, then sighed. “Nor would I. Laurent had it coming” — this was almost a growl — “and I still owe the wolves for that.”

“This isn’t good,” Jasper said. “It’s too even a fight. We’d have the upper hand in skill, but not numbers.

We'd win, but at what price?" His tense eyes flashed to Alice's face and away.

I wanted to scream out loud as I grasped what Jasper meant.

We would win, but we would lose. Some wouldn't survive.

I looked around the room at their faces — Jasper, Alice, Emmett, Rose, Esme, Carlisle … Edward — the faces of my family.

# Chapter 14

## DECLARATION

“You can't be serious,” I said Wednesday afternoon. “You’ve completely lost your mind!”

“Say whatever you like about me,” Alice answered. “The party is still on.”

I stared at her, my eyes so wide with disbelief it felt like they might fall out and land on my lunch tray.

“Oh, calm down, Bella! There’s no reason not to go through with it. Besides, the invitations are already sent.”

“But … the … you … I … insane!” I spluttered.

“You’ve already bought my present,” she reminded me. “You don’t have to do anything but show up.”

I made an effort to calm myself. “With everything that is going on right now, a party is hardly appropriate.”

“Graduation is what’s going on right now, and a party is so appropriate it’s almost passé.”

“Alice!”

She sighed, and tried to be serious. “There are a few things we need to get in order now, and that’s going to take a little time. As long as we’re sitting here waiting, we might as well commemorate the good stuff. You’re only going to graduate from high school — for the first time — once. You don’t get to be human again, Bella. This is a once-in-a-lifetime shot.”

Edward, silent through our little argument, flashed her a warning look. She stuck out her tongue at him. She was right — her soft voice would never carry over the babble of the cafeteria. And no one would understand the meaning behind her words in any case.

“What few things do we need to get in order?” I asked, refusing to be sidetracked.

Edward answered in a low voice. “Jasper thinks we could use some help. Tanya’s family isn’t the only choice we have. Carlisle’s trying to track down a few old friends, and Jasper is looking up Peter and Charlotte. He’s considering talking to Maria … but no one really wants to involve the southerners.”

Alice shuddered delicately.

“It shouldn’t be too hard to convince them to help,” he continued. “Nobody wants a visit from Italy.”

“But these friends — they’re not going to be … vegetarians, right?” I protested, using the Cullens’ tongue-in-cheek nickname for themselves.

“No,” Edward answered, suddenly expressionless.

“Here? In Forks?”

“They’re friends,” Alice reassured me. “Everything’s going to be fine. Don’t worry. And then, Jasper has to teach us a few courses on newborn elimination… .”

Edward’s eyes brightened at that, and a brief smile flashed across his face. My stomach suddenly felt like it was full of sharp little splinters of ice.

"When are you going?" I asked in a hollow voice. I couldn't stand this — the idea that someone might not come back. What if it was Emmett, so brave and thoughtless that he was never the least bit cautious? Or Esme, so sweet and motherly that I couldn't even imagine her in a fight? Or Alice, so tiny, so fragile-looking? Or … but I couldn't even think the name, consider the possibility.

"A week," Edward said casually. "That ought to give us enough time."

The icy splinters twisted uncomfortably in my stomach. I was suddenly nauseated.

"You look kind of green, Bella," Alice commented.

Edward put his arm around me and pulled me tightly against his side. "It's going to be fine, Bella. Trust me."

Sure, I thought to myself. Trust him. He wasn't the one who was going to have to sit behind and wonder whether or not the core of his existence was going to come home.

And then it occurred to me. Maybe I didn't need to sit behind. A week was more than enough time.

"You're looking for help," I said slowly.

"Yes." Alice's head cocked to the side as she processed the change in my tone.

I looked only at her as I answered. My voice was just slightly louder than a whisper. "I could help."

Edward's body was suddenly rigid, his arm too tight around me. He exhaled, and the sound was a hiss.

But it was Alice, still calm, who answered. “That really wouldn’t be helpful.”

“Why not?” I argued; I could hear the desperation in my voice. “Eight is better than seven. There’s more than enough time.”

“There’s not enough time to make you helpful, Bella,” she disagreed coolly. “Do you remember how Jasper described the young ones? You’d be no good in a fight. You wouldn’t be able to control your instincts, and that would make you an easy target. And then Edward would get hurt trying to protect you.” She folded her arms across her chest, pleased with her unassailable logic.

And I knew she was right, when she put it like that. I slumped in my seat, my sudden hope defeated. Beside me, Edward relaxed.

He whispered the reminder in my ear. “Not because you’re afraid.”

“Oh,” Alice said, and a blank look crossed her face. Then her expression became surly. “I hate last-minute cancellations. So that puts the party attendance list down to sixty-five… .”

“Sixty-five!” My eyes bulged again. I didn’t have that many friends. Did I even know that many people?

“Who canceled?” Edward wondered, ignoring me.

“Renée.”

“What?” I gasped.

"She was going to surprise you for your graduation, but something went wrong. You'll have a message when you get home."

For a moment, I just let myself enjoy the relief. Whatever it was that went wrong for my mother, I was eternally grateful to it. If she had come to Forks now … I didn't want to think about it. My head would explode.

The message light was flashing when I got home. My feeling of relief flared again as I listened to my mother describe Phil's accident on the ball field — while demonstrating a slide, he'd tangled up with the catcher and broken his thigh bone; he was entirely dependent on her, and there was no way she could leave him. My mom was still apologizing when the message cut off.

"Well, that's one," I sighed.

"One what?" Edward asked.

"One person I don't have to worry about getting killed this week."

He rolled his eyes.

"Why won't you and Alice take this seriously?" I demanded. "This is serious."

He smiled. "Confidence."

"Wonderful," I grumbled. I picked up the phone and dialed Renée's number. I knew it would be a long conversation, but I also knew that I wouldn't have to contribute much.

I just listened, and reassured her every time I could get a word in: I wasn't disappointed, I wasn't mad, I wasn't hurt. She should concentrate on helping Phil get better. I passed on my "get well soon" to Phil, and promised to call her with every single detail from Forks High's generic graduation. Finally, I had to use my desperate need to study for finals to get off the phone.

Edward's patience was endless. He waited politely through the whole conversation, just playing with my hair and smiling whenever I looked up. It was probably superficial to notice such things while I had so many more important things to think about, but his smile still knocked the breath out of me. He was so beautiful that it made it hard sometimes to think about anything else, hard to concentrate on Phil's troubles or Renée's apologies or hostile vampire armies. I was only human.

As soon as I hung up, I stretched onto my tiptoes to kiss him. He put his hands around my waist and lifted me onto the kitchen counter, so I wouldn't have to reach as far. That worked for me. I locked my arms around his neck and melted against his cold chest.

Too soon, as usual, he pulled away.

I felt my face slip into a pout. He laughed at my expression as he extricated himself from my arms and legs. He leaned against the counter next to me and put one arm lightly around my shoulders.

"I know you think that I have some kind of perfect, unyielding self-control, but that's not actually the case."

"I wish," I sighed.

And he sighed, too.

“After school tomorrow,” he said, changing the subject, “I’m going hunting with Carlisle, Esme, and Rosalie. Just for a few hours — we’ll stay close. Alice, Jasper, and Emmett should be able to keep you safe.”

“Ugh,” I grumbled. Tomorrow was the first day of finals, and it was only a half-day. I had Calculus and History — the only two challenges in my line-up — so I’d have almost the whole day without him, and nothing to do but worry. “I hate being babysat.”

“It’s temporary,” he promised.

“Jasper will be bored. Emmett will make fun of me.”

“They’ll be on their best behavior.”

“Right,” I grumbled.

And then it occurred to me that I did have one option besides babysitters. “You know … I haven’t been to La Push since the bonfire.”

I watched his face carefully for any change in expression. His eyes tightened the tiniest bit.

“I’d be safe enough there,” I reminded him.

He thought about it for a few seconds. “You’re probably right.”

His face was calm, but just a little too smooth. I almost asked if he’d rather I stayed here, but then I thought of the ribbing Emmett would no doubt dish out, and I changed the subject. “Are you thirsty already?” I asked, reaching up to stroke the light

shadow beneath his eye. His irises were still a deep gold.

“Not really.” He seemed reluctant to answer, and that surprised me. I waited for an explanation.

“We want to be as strong as possible,” he explained, still reluctant. “We’ll probably hunt again on the way, looking for big game.”

“That makes you stronger?”

He searched my face for something, but there was nothing to find but curiosity.

“Yes,” he finally said. “Human blood makes us the strongest, though only fractionally. Jasper’s been thinking about cheating — adverse as he is to the idea, he’s nothing if not practical — but he won’t suggest it. He knows what Carlisle will say.”

“Would that help?” I asked quietly.

“It doesn’t matter. We aren’t going to change who we are.”

I frowned. If something helped even the odds ... and then I shuddered, realizing I was willing to have a stranger die to protect him. I was horrified at myself, but not entirely able to deny it, either.

He changed the subject again. “That’s why they’re so strong, of course. The newborns are full of human blood — their own blood, reacting to the change. It lingers in the tissues and strengthens them. Their bodies use it up slowly, like Jasper said, the strength starting to wane after about a year.”

“How strong will I be?”

He grinned. “Stronger than I am.”

“Stronger than Emmett?”

The grin got bigger. “Yes. Do me a favor and challenge him to an arm-wrestling match. It would be a good experience for him.”

I laughed. It sounded so ridiculous.

Then I sighed and hopped down from the counter, because I really couldn’t put it off any longer. I had to cram, and cram hard. Luckily I had Edward’s help, and Edward was an excellent tutor — since he knew absolutely everything. I figured my biggest problem would be just focusing on the tests. If I didn’t watch myself, I might end up writing my History essay on the vampire wars of the South.

I took a break to call Jacob, and Edward seemed just as comfortable as he had when I was on the phone with Renée. He played with my hair again.

Though it was the middle of the afternoon, my call woke Jacob up, and he was grouchy at first. He cheered right up when I asked if I could visit the next day. The Quileute school was already out for the summer, so he told me to come over as early as I could. I was pleased to have an option besides being babysat. There was a tiny bit more dignity in spending the day with Jacob.

Some of that dignity was lost when Edward insisted again on delivering me to the border line like a child being exchanged by custodial guardians.

“So how do you feel you did on your exams?” Edward asked on the way, making small talk.

"History was easy, but I don't know about the Calculus. It seemed like it was making sense, so that probably means I failed."

He laughed. "I'm sure you did fine. Or, if you're really worried, I could bribe Mr. Varner to give you an A."

"Er, thanks, but no thanks."

He laughed again, but suddenly stopped when we turned the last bend and saw the red car waiting. He frowned in concentration, and then, as he parked the car, he sighed.

"What's wrong?" I asked, my hand on the door.

He shook his head. "Nothing." His eyes were narrowed as he stared through the windshield toward the other car. I'd seen that look before.

"You're not listening to Jacob, are you?" I accused.

"It's not easy to ignore someone when he's shouting."

"Oh." I thought about that for a second. "What's he shouting?" I whispered.

"I'm absolutely certain he'll mention it himself," Edward said in a wry tone.

I would have pressed the issue, but then Jacob honked his horn — two quick impatient honks.

"That's impolite," Edward growled.

"That's Jacob," I sighed, and I hurried out before Jacob did something to really set Edward's teeth on edge.

I waved to Edward before I got into the Rabbit and, from that distance, it looked like he was truly upset about the honking thing ... or whatever Jacob was thinking about. But my eyes were weak and made mistakes all the time.

I wanted Edward to come to me. I wanted to make both of them get out of their cars and shake hands and be friends — be Edward and Jacob rather than vampire and werewolf. It was as if I had those two stubborn magnets in my hands again, and I was holding them together, trying to force nature to reverse herself... .

I sighed, and climbed in Jacob's car.

"Hey, Bells." Jake's tone was cheerful, but his voice dragged. I examined his face as he started down the road, driving a little faster than I did, but slower than Edward, on his way back to La Push.

Jacob looked different, maybe even sick. His eyelids drooped and his face was drawn. His shaggy hair stuck out in random directions; it was almost to his chin in some places.

"Are you all right, Jake?"

"Just tired," he managed to get out before he was overcome by a massive yawn. When he finished, he asked, "What do you want to do today?"

I eyed him for a moment. "Let's just hang out at your place for now," I suggested. He didn't look like he was up for much more than that. "We can ride our bikes later."

"Sure, sure," he said, yawning again.

Jacob's house was vacant, and that felt strange. I realized I thought of Billy as a nearly permanent fixture there.

"Where's your dad?"

"Over at the Clearwaters'. He's been hanging out there a lot since Harry died. Sue gets lonely."

Jacob sat down on the old couch that was no bigger than a loveseat and squished himself to the side to make room for me.

"Oh. That's nice. Poor Sue."

"Yeah … she's having some trouble… ." He hesitated. "With her kids."

"Sure, it's got to be hard on Seth and Leah, losing their dad… ."

"Uh-huh," he agreed, lost in thought. He picked up the remote and flipped on the TV without seeming to think about it. He yawned.

"What's with you, Jake? You're like a zombie."

"I got about two hours of sleep last night, and four the night before," he told me. He stretched his long arms slowly, and I could hear the joints crack as he flexed. He settled his left arm along the back of the sofa behind me, and slumped back to rest his head against the wall. "I'm exhausted."

"Why aren't you sleeping?" I asked.

He made a face. "Sam's being difficult. He doesn't trust your bloodsuckers. I've been running double

shifts for two weeks and nobody's touched me yet, but he still doesn't buy it. So I'm on my own for now."

"Double shifts? Is this because you're trying to watch out for me? Jake, that's wrong! You need to sleep. I'll be fine."

"It's no big deal." His eyes were abruptly more alert. "Hey, did you ever find out who was in your room? Is there anything new?"

I ignored the second question. "No, we didn't find anything out about my, um, visitor."

"Then I'll be around," he said as his eyes slid closed.

"Jake … ," I started to whine.

"Hey, it's the least I can do — I offered eternal servitude, remember. I'm your slave for life."

"I don't want a slave!"

His eyes didn't open. "What do you want, Bella?"

"I want my friend Jacob — and I don't want him half-dead, hurting himself in some misguided attempt —"

He cut me off. "Look at it this way — I'm hoping I can track down a vampire I'm allowed to kill, okay?"

I didn't answer. He looked at me then, peeking at my reaction.

"Kidding, Bella."

I stared at the TV.

"So, any special plans next week? You're graduating. Wow. That's big." His voice turned flat, and his face, already drawn, looked downright haggard as his eyes closed again — not in exhaustion this time, but in denial. I realized that graduation still had a horrible significance for him, though my intentions were now disrupted.

"No special plans," I said carefully, hoping he would hear the reassurance in my words without a more detailed explanation. I didn't want to get into it now. For one thing, he didn't look up for any difficult conversations. For another, I knew he would read too much into my qualms. "Well, I do have to go to a graduation party. Mine." I made a disgusted sound. "Alice loves parties, and she's invited the whole town to her place the night of. It's going to be horrible."

His eyes opened as I spoke, and a relieved smile made his face look less worn. "I didn't get an invitation. I'm hurt," he teased.

"Consider yourself invited. It's supposedly my party, so I should be able to ask who I want."

"Thanks," he said sarcastically, his eyes slipping closed once more.

"I wish you would come," I said without any hope. "It would be more fun. For me, I mean."

"Sure, sure," he mumbled. "That would be very … wise …" His voice trailed off.

A few seconds later, he was snoring.

Poor Jacob. I studied his dreaming face, and liked what I saw. While he slept, every trace of defensiveness and bitterness disappeared and

suddenly he was the boy who had been my very best friend before all the werewolf nonsense had gotten in the way. He looked so much younger. He looked like my Jacob.

I nestled into the couch to wait out his nap, hoping he would sleep for a while and make up some of what he'd lost. I flipped through channels, but there wasn't much on. I settled for a cooking show, knowing, as I watched, that I'd never put that much effort into Charlie's dinner. Jacob continued to snore, getting louder. I turned up the TV.

I was strangely relaxed, almost sleepy, too. This house felt safer than my own, probably because no one had ever come looking for me here. I curled up on the sofa and thought about taking a nap myself. Maybe I would have, but Jacob's snoring was impossible to tune out. So, instead of sleeping, I let my mind wander.

Finals were done, and most of them had been a cakewalk. Calculus, the one exception, was behind me, pass or fail. My high school education was over. And I didn't really know how I felt about that. I couldn't look at it objectively, tied up as it was with my human life being over.

I wondered how long Edward planned to use this "not because you're scared" excuse. I was going to have to put my foot down sometime.

If I were thinking practically, I knew it made more sense to ask Carlisle to change me the second I made it through the graduation line. Forks was becoming nearly as dangerous as a war zone. No, Forks was a war zone. Not to mention … it would be a good excuse to miss the graduation party. I smiled to myself as I

thought of that most trivial of reasons for changing. Silly ... yet still compelling.

But Edward was right — I wasn't quite ready yet.

And I didn't want to be practical. I wanted Edward to be the one. It wasn't a rational desire. I was sure that — about two seconds after someone actually bit me and the venom started burning through my veins — I really wouldn't care anymore who had done it. So it shouldn't make a difference.

It was hard to define, even to myself, why it mattered. There was just something about him being the one to make the choice — to want to keep me enough that he wouldn't just allow me to be changed, he would act to keep me. It was childish, but I liked the idea that his lips would be the last good thing I would feel. Even more embarrassingly, something I would never say aloud, I wanted his venom to poison my system. It would make me belong to him in a tangible, quantifiable way.

But I knew he was going to stick to his marriage scheme like glue — because a delay was what he was clearly after and it was working so far. I tried to imagine telling my parents that I was getting married this summer. Telling Angela and Ben and Mike. I couldn't. I couldn't think of the words to say. It would be easier to tell them I was becoming a vampire. And I was sure that at least my mother — were I to tell her every detail of the truth — would be more strenuously opposed to me getting married than to me a becoming vampire. I grimaced to myself as I imagined her horrified expression.

Then, for just a second, I saw that same odd vision of Edward and me on a porch swing, wearing clothes from another kind of world. A world where it would

surprise no one if I wore his ring on my finger. A simpler place, where love was defined in simpler ways. One plus one equals two… .

Jacob snorted and rolled to his side. His arm swung off the back of the couch and pinned me against his body.

Holy crow, but he was heavy! And hot. It was sweltering after just a few seconds.

I tried to slide out from under his arm without waking him, but I had to shove a little bit, and when his arm fell off me, his eyes snapped open. He jumped to his feet, looking around anxiously.

"What? What?" he asked, disoriented.

"It's just me, Jake. Sorry I woke you."

He turned to look at me, blinking and confused. "Bella?"

"Hey, sleepy."

"Oh, man! Did I fall asleep? I'm sorry! How long was I out?"

"A few Emerils. I lost count."

He flopped back on the couch next to me. "Wow. Sorry about that, really."

I patted his hair, trying to smooth the wild disarray. "Don't feel bad. I'm glad you got some sleep."

He yawned and stretched. "I'm useless these days. No wonder Billy's always gone. I'm so boring."

"You're fine," I assured him.

"Ugh, let's go outside. I need to walk around or I'll pass out again."

"Jake, go back to sleep. I'm good. I'll call Edward to come pick me up." I patted my pockets as I spoke, and realized they were empty. "Shoot, I'll have to borrow your phone. I think I must have left his in the car." I started to unfold myself.

"No!" Jacob insisted, grabbing my hand. "No, stay. You hardly ever make it down. I can't believe I wasted all this time."

He pulled me off the couch as he spoke, and then led the way outside, ducking his head as he passed under the doorframe. It had gotten much cooler while Jacob slept; the air was unseasonably cold — there must be a storm on the way. It felt like February, not May.

The wintry air seemed to make Jacob more alert. He paced back and forth in front of the house for a minute, dragging me along with him.

"I'm an idiot," he muttered to himself.

"What's the matter, Jake? So you fell asleep." I shrugged.

"I wanted to talk to you. I can't believe this."

"Talk to me now," I said.

Jacob met my eyes for a second, and then looked away quickly toward the trees. It almost looked like he was blushing, but it was hard to tell with his dark skin.

I suddenly remembered what Edward had said when he dropped me off — that Jacob would tell me whatever he was shouting in his head. I started gnawing on my lip.

“Look,” Jacob said. “I was planning to do this a little bit differently.” He laughed, and it sounded like he was laughing at himself. “Smoother,” he added. “I was going to work up to it, but” — and he looked at the clouds, dimmer as the afternoon progressed — “I’m out of time to work.”

He laughed again, nervous. We were still pacing slowly.

“What are you talking about?” I demanded.

He took a deep breath. “I want to tell you something. And you already know it ... but I think I should say it out loud anyway. Just so there’s never any confusion on the subject.”

I planted my feet, and he came to a stop. I took my hand away and folded my arms across my chest. I was suddenly sure that I didn’t want to know what he was building up to.

Jacob’s eyebrows pulled down, throwing his deep-set eyes into shadow. They were pitch black as they bored into mine.

“I’m in love with you, Bella,” Jacob said in a strong, sure voice. “Bella, I love you. And I want you to pick me instead of him. I know you don’t feel that way, but I need the truth out there so that you know your options. I wouldn’t want a miscommunication to stand in our way.”

# Chapter 15
## WAGER

I stared at him for a long minute, speechless. I could not think of one thing to say to him.

As he watched my dumbfounded expression, the seriousness left his face.

“Okay,” he said, grinning. “That’s all.”

“Jake —” It felt like there was something big sticking in my throat. I tried to clear the obstruction. “I can’t — I mean I don’t … I have to go.”

I turned, but he grabbed my shoulders and spun me around.

“No, wait. I know that, Bella. But, look, answer me this, all right? Do you want me to go away and never see you again? Be honest.”

It was hard to concentrate on his question, so it took a minute to answer. “No, I don’t want that,” I finally admitted.

Jacob grinned again. “See.”

“But I don’t want you around for the same reason that you want me around,” I objected.

“Tell me exactly why you want me around, then.”

I thought carefully. “I miss you when you’re not there. When you’re happy,” I qualified carefully, “it makes me happy. But I could say the same thing about

Charlie, Jacob. You're family. I love you, but I'm not in love with you."

He nodded, unruffled. "But you do want me around."

"Yes." I sighed. He was impossible to discourage.

"Then I'll stick around."

"You're a glutton for punishment," I grumbled.

"Yep." He stroked the tips of his fingers across my right cheek. I slapped his hand away.

"Do you think you could behave yourself a little better, at least?" I asked, irritated.

"No, I don't. You decide, Bella. You can have me the way I am — bad behavior included — or not at all."

I stared at him, frustrated. "That's mean."

"So are you."

That pulled me up short, and I took an involuntary step back. He was right. If I wasn't mean — and greedy, too — I would tell him I didn't want to be friends and walk away. It was wrong to try to keep my friend when that would hurt him. I didn't know what I was doing here, but I was suddenly sure that it wasn't good.

"You're right," I whispered.

He laughed. "I forgive you. Just try not to get too mad at me. Because I recently decided that I'm not giving up. There really is something irresistible about a lost cause."

"Jacob." I stared into his dark eyes, trying to make him take me seriously. "I love him, Jacob. He's my whole life."

"You love me, too," he reminded me. He held up his hand when I started to protest. "Not the same way, I know. But he's not your whole life, either. Not anymore. Maybe he was once, but he left. And now he's just going to have to deal with the consequence of that choice — me."

I shook my head. "You're impossible."

Suddenly, he was serious. He took my chin in his hand, holding it firmly so that I couldn't look away from his intent gaze.

"Until your heart stops beating, Bella," he said. "I'll be here — fighting. Don't forget that you have options."

"I don't want options," I disagreed, trying to yank my chin free unsuccessfully. "And my heartbeats are numbered, Jacob. The time is almost gone."

His eyes narrowed. "All the more reason to fight — fight harder now, while I can," he whispered.

He still had my chin — his fingers holding too tight, till it hurt — and I saw the resolve form abruptly in his eyes.

"N —" I started to object, but it was too late.

His lips crushed mine, stopping my protest. He kissed me angrily, roughly, his other hand gripping tight around the back of my neck, making escape impossible. I shoved against his chest with all my strength, but he didn't even seem to notice. His

mouth was soft, despite the anger, his lips molding to mine in a warm, unfamiliar way.

I grabbed at his face, trying to push it away, failing again. He seemed to notice this time, though, and it aggravated him. His lips forced mine open, and I could feel his hot breath in my mouth.

Acting on instinct, I let my hands drop to my side, and shut down. I opened my eyes and didn't fight, didn't feel ... just waited for him to stop.

It worked. The anger seemed to evaporate, and he pulled back to look at me. He pressed his lips softly to mine again, once, twice ... a third time. I pretended I was a statue and waited.

Finally, he let go of my face and leaned away.

"Are you done now?" I asked in an expressionless voice.

"Yes," he sighed. He started to smile, closing his eyes.

I pulled my arm back and then let it snap forward, punching him in the mouth with as much power as I could force out of my body.

There was a crunching sound.

"Ow! OW!" I screamed, frantically hopping up and down in agony while I clutched my hand to my chest. It was broken, I could feel it.

Jacob stared at me in shock. "Are you all right?"

"No, dammit! You broke my hand!"

"Bella, you broke your hand. Now stop dancing around and let me look at it."

"Don't touch me! I'm going home right now!"

"I'll get my car," he said calmly. He wasn't even rubbing his jaw like they did in the movies. How pathetic.

"No, thanks," I hissed. "I'd rather walk." I turned toward the road. It was only a few miles to the border. As soon as I got away from him, Alice would see me. She'd send somebody to pick me up.

"Just let me drive you home," Jacob insisted. Unbelievably, he had the nerve to wrap his arm around my waist.

I jerked away from him.

"Fine!" I growled. "Do! I can't wait to see what Edward does to you! I hope he snaps your neck, you pushy, obnoxious, moronic DOG!"

Jacob rolled his eyes. He walked me to the passenger side of his car and helped me in. When he got in the driver's side, he was whistling.

"Didn't I hurt you at all?" I asked, furious and annoyed.

"Are you kidding? If you hadn't started screaming, I might not have figured out that you were trying to punch me. I may not be made out of stone, but I'm not that soft."

"I hate you, Jacob Black."

"That's good. Hate is a passionate emotion."

"I'll give you passionate," I muttered under my breath. "Murder, the ultimate crime of passion."

"Oh, c'mon," he said, all cheery and looking like he was about to start whistling again. "That had to be better than kissing a rock."

"Not even remotely close," I told him coldly.

He pursed his lips. "You could just be saying that."

"But I'm not."

That seemed to bother him for a second, but then he perked up. "You're just mad. I don't have any experience with this kind of thing, but I thought it was pretty incredible myself."

"Ugh," I groaned.

"You're going to think about it tonight. When he thinks you're asleep, you'll be thinking about your options."

"If I think about you tonight, it will be because I'm having a nightmare."

He slowed the car to a crawl, turning to stare at me with his dark eyes wide and earnest. "Just think about how it could be, Bella," he urged in a soft, eager voice. "You wouldn't have to change anything for me. You know Charlie would be happy if you picked me. I could protect you just as well as your vampire can — maybe better. And I would make you happy, Bella. There's so much I could give you that he can't. I'll bet he couldn't even kiss you like that — because he would hurt you. I would never, never hurt you, Bella."

I held up my injured hand.

He sighed. “That wasn’t my fault. You should have known better.”

“Jacob, I can’t be happy without him.”

“You’ve never tried,” he disagreed. “When he left, you spent all your energy holding on to him. You could be happy if you let go. You could be happy with me.”

“I don’t want to be happy with anyone but him,” I insisted.

“You’ll never be able to be as sure of him as you are of me. He left you once, he could do it again.”

“No, he will not,” I said through my teeth. The pain of the memory bit into me like the lash of a whip. It made me want to hurt him back. “You left me once,” I reminded him in a cold voice, thinking of the weeks he’d hidden from me, the words he’d said to me in the woods beside his home… .

“I never did,” he argued hotly. “They told me I couldn’t tell you — that it wasn’t safe for you if we were together. But I never left, never! I used to run around your house at night — like I do now. Just making sure you were okay.”

I wasn’t about to let him make me feel bad for him now.

“Take me home. My hand hurts.”

He sighed, and started driving at a normal speed, watching the road.

“Just think about it, Bella.”

“No,” I said stubbornly.

"You will. Tonight. And I'll be thinking about you while you're thinking about me."

"Like I said, a nightmare."

He grinned over at me. "You kissed me back."

I gasped, unthinkingly balling my hands up into fists again, hissing when my broken hand reacted.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I did not."

"I think I can tell the difference."

"Obviously you can't — that was not kissing back, that was trying to get you the hell off of me, you idiot."

He laughed a low, throaty laugh. "Touchy. Almost overly defensive, I would say."

I took a deep breath. There was no point in arguing with him; he would twist anything I said. I concentrated on my hand, trying to stretch out my fingers, to ascertain where the broken parts were. Sharp pains stabbed along my knuckles. I groaned.

"I'm really sorry about your hand," Jacob said, sounding almost sincere. "Next time you want to hit me, use a baseball bat or a crowbar, okay?"

"Don't think I'll forget that," I muttered.

I didn't realize where we were going until we were on my road.

"Why are you taking me here?" I demanded.

He looked at me blankly. “I thought you said you were going home?”

“Ugh. I guess you can’t take me to Edward’s house, can you?” I ground my teeth in frustration.

Pain twisted across his face, and I could see that this affected him more than anything else I’d said.

“This is your home, Bella,” he said quietly.

“Yes, but do any doctors live here?” I asked, holding up my hand again.

“Oh.” He thought about that for a minute. “I’ll take you to the hospital. Or Charlie can.”

“I don’t want to go to the hospital. It’s embarrassing and unnecessary.”

He let the Rabbit idle in front of the house, deliberating with an unsure expression. Charlie’s cruiser was in the driveway.

I sighed. “Go home, Jacob.”

I climbed out of the car awkwardly, heading for the house. The engine cut off behind me, and I was less surprised than annoyed to find Jacob beside me again.

“What are you going to do?” he asked.

“I am going to get some ice on my hand, and then I am going to call Edward and tell him to come and get me and take me to Carlisle so that he can fix my hand. Then, if you’re still here, I am going to go hunt up a crowbar.”

He didn't answer. He opened the front door and held it for me.

We walked silently past the front room where Charlie was lying on the sofa.

"Hey, kids," he said, sitting forward. "Nice to see you here, Jake."

"Hey, Charlie," Jacob answered casually, pausing. I stalked on to the kitchen.

"What's wrong with her?" Charlie wondered.

"She thinks she broke her hand," I heard Jacob tell him. I went to the freezer and pulled out a tray of ice cubes.

"How did she do that?" As my father, I thought Charlie ought to sound a bit less amused and a bit more concerned.

Jacob laughed. "She hit me."

Charlie laughed, too, and I scowled while I beat the tray against the edge of the sink. The ice scattered inside the basin, and I grabbed a handful with my good hand and wrapped the cubes in the dishcloth on the counter.

"Why did she hit you?"

"Because I kissed her," Jacob said, unashamed.

"Good for you, kid," Charlie congratulated him.

I ground my teeth and went for the phone. I dialed Edward's cell.

"Bella?" he answered on the first ring. He sounded more than relieved — he was delighted. I could hear the Volvo's engine in the background; he was already in the car — that was good. "You left the phone … I'm sorry, did Jacob drive you home?"

"Yes," I grumbled. "Will you come and get me, please?"

"I'm on my way," he said at once. "What's wrong?"

"I want Carlisle to look at my hand. I think it's broken."

It had gone quiet in the front room, and I wondered when Jacob would bolt. I smiled a grim smile, imagining his discomfort.

"What happened?" Edward demanded, his voice going flat.

"I punched Jacob," I admitted.

"Good," Edward said bleakly. "Though I'm sorry you're hurt."

I laughed once, because he sounded as pleased as Charlie had.

"I wish I'd hurt him." I sighed in frustration. "I didn't do any damage at all."

"I can fix that," he offered.

"I was hoping you would say that."

There was a slight pause. "That doesn't sound like you," he said, wary now. "What did he do?"

“He kissed me,” I growled.

All I heard on the other end of the line was the sound of an engine accelerating.

In the other room, Charlie spoke again. “Maybe you ought to take off, Jake,” he suggested.

“I think I’ll hang out here, if you don’t mind.”

“Your funeral,” Charlie muttered.

“Is the dog still there?” Edward finally spoke again.

“Yes.”

“I’m around the corner,” he said darkly, and the line disconnected.

As I hung up the phone, smiling, I heard the sound of his car racing down the street. The brakes protested loudly as he slammed to a stop out front. I went to get the door.

“How’s your hand?” Charlie asked as I walked by. Charlie looked uncomfortable. Jacob lolled next to him on the sofa, perfectly at ease.

I lifted the ice pack to show it off. “It’s swelling.”

“Maybe you should pick on people your own size,” Charlie suggested.

“Maybe,” I agreed. I walked on to open the door. Edward was waiting.

“Let me see,” he murmured.

He examined my hand gently, so carefully that it caused me no pain at all. His hands were almost as cold as the ice, and they felt good against my skin.

"I think you're right about the break," he said. "I'm proud of you. You must have put some force behind this."

"As much as I have." I sighed. "Not enough, apparently."

He kissed my hand softly. "I'll take care of it," he promised. And then he called, "Jacob," his voice still quiet and even.

"Now, now," Charlie cautioned.

I heard Charlie heave himself off of the sofa. Jacob got to the hall first, and much more quietly, but Charlie was not far behind him. Jacob's expression was alert and eager.

"I don't want any fighting, do you understand?" Charlie looked only at Edward when he spoke. "I can go put my badge on if that makes my request more official."

"That won't be necessary," Edward said in a restrained tone.

"Why don't you arrest me, Dad?" I suggested. "I'm the one throwing punches."

Charlie raised an eyebrow. "Do you want to press charges, Jake?"

"No." Jacob grinned, incorrigible. "I'll take the trade any day."

Edward grimaced.

“Dad, don’t you have a baseball bat somewhere in your room? I want to borrow it for a minute.”

Charlie looked at me evenly. “Enough, Bella.”

“Let’s go have Carlisle look at your hand before you wind up in a jail cell,” Edward said. He put his arm around me and pulled me toward the door.

“Fine,” I said, leaning against him. I wasn’t so angry anymore, now that Edward was with me. I felt comforted, and my hand didn’t bother me as much.

We were walking down the sidewalk when I heard Charlie whispering anxiously behind me.

“What are you doing? Are you crazy?”

“Give me a minute, Charlie,” Jacob answered. “Don’t worry, I’ll be right back.”

I looked back and Jacob was following us, stopping to close the door in Charlie’s surprised and uneasy face.

Edward ignored him at first, leading me to the car. He helped me inside, shut the door, and then turned to face Jacob on the sidewalk.

I leaned anxiously through the open window. Charlie was visible in the house, peeking through the drapes in the front room.

Jacob’s stance was casual, his arms folded across his chest, but the muscles in his jaw were tight.

Edward spoke in a voice so peaceful and gentle that it made the words strangely more threatening. “I’m not going to kill you now, because it would upset Bella.”

“Hmph,” I grumbled.

Edward turned slightly to throw me a quick smile. His face was still calm. “It would bother you in the morning,” he said, brushing his fingers across my cheek.

Then he turned back to Jacob. “But if you ever bring her back damaged again — and I don’t care whose fault it is; I don’t care if she merely trips, or if a meteor falls out of the sky and hits her in the head — if you return her to me in less than the perfect condition that I left her in, you will be running with three legs. Do you understand that, mongrel?”

Jacob rolled his eyes.

“Who’s going back?” I muttered.

Edward continued as if he hadn’t heard me. “And if you ever kiss her again, I will break your jaw for her,” he promised, his voice still gentle and velvet and deadly.

“What if she wants me to?” Jacob drawled, arrogant.

“Hah!” I snorted.

“If that’s what she wants, then I won’t object.” Edward shrugged, untroubled. “You might want to wait for her to say it, rather than trust your interpretation of body language — but it’s your face.”

Jacob grinned.

"You wish," I grumbled.

"Yes, he does," Edward murmured.

"Well, if you're done rummaging through my head," Jacob said with a thick edge of annoyance, "why don't you go take care of her hand?"

"One more thing," Edward said slowly. "I'll be fighting for her, too. You should know that. I'm not taking anything for granted, and I'll be fighting twice as hard as you will."

"Good," Jacob growled. "It's no fun beating someone who forfeits."

"She is mine." Edward's low voice was suddenly dark, not as composed as before. "I didn't say I would fight fair."

"Neither did I."

"Best of luck."

Jacob nodded. "Yes, may the best man win."

"That sounds about right … pup."

Jacob grimaced briefly, then he composed his face and leaned around Edward to smile at me. I glowered back.

"I hope your hand feels better soon. I'm really sorry you're hurt."

Childishly, I turned my face away from him.

I didn't look up again as Edward walked around the car and climbed into the driver's side, so I didn't

know if Jacob went back into the house or continued to stand there, watching me.

“How do you feel?” Edward asked as we drove away.

“Irritated.”

He chuckled. “I meant your hand.”

I shrugged. “I’ve had worse.”

“True,” he agreed, and frowned.

Edward drove around the house to the garage. Emmett and Rosalie were there, Rosalie’s perfect legs, recognizable even sheathed in jeans, were sticking out from under the bottom of Emmett’s huge Jeep. Emmett was sitting beside her, one hand reached under the Jeep toward her. It took me a moment to realize that he was acting as the jack.

Emmett watched curiously as Edward helped me carefully out of the car. His eyes zeroed in on the hand I cradled against my chest.

Emmett grinned. “Fall down again, Bella?”

I glared at him fiercely. “No, Emmett. I punched a werewolf in the face.”

Emmett blinked, and then burst into a roar of laughter.

As Edward led me past them, Rosalie spoke from under the car.

“Jasper’s going to win the bet,” she said smugly.

Emmett's laughter stopped at once, and he studied me with appraising eyes.

"What bet?" I demanded, pausing.

"Let's get you to Carlisle," Edward urged. He was staring at Emmett. His head shook infinitesimally.

"What bet?" I insisted as I turned on him.

"Thanks, Rosalie," he muttered as he tightened his arm around my waist and pulled me toward the house.

"Edward … ," I grumbled.

"It's infantile," he shrugged. "Emmett and Jasper like to gamble."

"Emmett will tell me." I tried to turn, but his arm was like iron around me.

He sighed. "They're betting on how many times you … slip up in the first year."

"Oh." I grimaced, trying to hide my sudden horror as I realized what he meant. "They have a bet about how many people I'll kill?"

"Yes," he admitted unwillingly. "Rosalie thinks your temper will turn the odds in Jasper's favor."

I felt a little high. "Jasper's betting high."

"It will make him feel better if you have a hard time adjusting. He's tired of being the weakest link."

"Sure. Of course it will. I guess I could throw in a few extra homicides, if it makes Jasper happy. Why not?"

I was babbling, my voice a blank monotone. In my head, I was seeing newspaper headlines, lists of names… .

He squeezed me. “You don’t need to worry about it now. In fact, you don’t have to worry about it ever, if you don’t want to.”

I groaned, and Edward, thinking it was the pain in my hand that bothered me, pulled me faster toward the house.

My hand was broken, but there wasn’t any serious damage, just a tiny fissure in one knuckle. I didn’t want a cast, and Carlisle said I’d be fine in a brace if I promised to keep it on. I promised.

Edward could tell I was out of it as Carlisle worked to fit a brace carefully to my hand. He worried aloud a few times that I was in pain, but I assured him that that wasn’t it.

As if I needed — or even had room for — one more thing to worry about.

All of Jasper’s stories about newly created vampires had been percolating in my head since he’d explained his past. Now those stories jumped into sharp focus with the news of his and Emmett’s wager. I wondered randomly what they were betting. What was a motivating prize when you had everything?

I’d always known that I would be different. I hoped that I would be as strong as Edward said I would be. Strong and fast and, most of all, beautiful. Someone who could stand next to Edward and feel like she belonged there.

I'd been trying not to think too much about the other things that I would be. Wild. Bloodthirsty. Maybe I would not be able to stop myself from killing people. Strangers, people who had never harmed me. People like the growing number of victims in Seattle, who'd had families and friends and futures. People who'd had lives. And I could be the monster who took that away from them.

But, in truth, I could handle that part — because I trusted Edward, trusted him absolutely, to keep me from doing anything I would regret. I knew he'd take me to Antarctica and hunt penguins if I asked him to. And I would do whatever it took to be a good person. A good vampire. That thought would have made me giggle, if not for this new worry.

Because, if I really were somehow like that — like the nightmarish images of newborns that Jasper had painted in my head — could I possibly be me? And if all I wanted was to kill people, what would happen to the things I wanted now?

Edward was so obsessed with me not missing anything while I was human. Usually, it seemed kind of silly. There weren't many human experiences that I worried about missing. As long as I got to be with Edward, what else could I ask for?

I stared at his face while he watched Carlisle fix my hand. There was nothing in this world that I wanted more than him. Would that, could that, change?

Was there a human experience that I was not willing to give up?

# Chapter 16

## EPOCH

"I have nothing to wear!" I moaned to myself.

Every item of clothing I owned was strewn across my bed; my drawers and closets were bare. I stared into the empty recesses, willing something suitable to appear.

My khaki skirt lay over the back of the rocking chair, waiting for me to discover something that went with it just exactly right. Something that would make me look beautiful and grown up. Something that said special occasion. I was coming up empty.

It was almost time to go, and I was still wearing my favorite old sweats. Unless I could find something better here — and the odds weren't looking good at this point — I was going to graduate in them.

I scowled at the pile of clothes on my bed.

The kicker was that I knew exactly what I would have worn if it were still available — my kidnapped red blouse. I punched the wall with my good hand.

"Stupid, thieving, annoying vampire!" I growled.

"What did I do?" Alice demanded.

She was leaning casually beside the open window as if she'd been there the whole time.

"Knock, knock," she added with a grin.

"Is it really so hard to wait for me to get the door?"

She threw a flat, white box onto my bed. “I’m just passing through. I thought you might need something to wear.”

I looked at the big package lying on top of my unsatisfying wardrobe and grimaced.

“Admit it,” Alice said. “I’m a lifesaver.”

“You’re a lifesaver,” I muttered. “Thanks.”

“Well, it’s nice to get something right for a change. You don’t know how irritating it is — missing things the way I have been. I feel so useless. So ... normal.” She cringed in horror of the word.

“I can’t imagine how awful that must feel. Being normal? Ugh.”

She laughed. “Well, at least this makes up for missing your annoying thief — now I just have to figure out what I’m not seeing in Seattle.”

When she said the words that way — putting the two situations together in one sentence — right then it clicked. The elusive something that had been bothering me for days, the important connection that I couldn’t quite put together, suddenly became clear. I stared at her, my face frozen with whatever expression was already in place.

“Aren’t you going to open it?” she asked. She sighed when I didn’t move immediately, and tugged the top of the box off herself. She pulled something out and held it up, but I couldn’t concentrate on what it was. “Pretty, don’t you think? I picked blue, because I know it’s Edward’s favorite on you.”

I wasn’t listening.

"It's the same," I whispered.

"What is?" she demanded. "You don't have anything like this. For crying out loud, you only own one skirt!"

"No, Alice! Forget the clothes, listen!"

"You don't like it?" Alice's face clouded with disappointment.

"Listen, Alice, don't you see? It's the same! The one who broke in and stole my things, and the new vampires in Seattle. They're together!"

The clothes slipped from her fingers and fell back into the box.

Alice focused now, her voice suddenly sharp. "Why do you think that?"

"Remember what Edward said? About someone using the holes in your vision to keep you from seeing the newborns? And then what you said before, about the timing being too perfect — how careful my thief was to make no contact, as if he knew you would see that. I think you were right, Alice, I think he did know. I think he was using those holes, too. And what are the odds that two different people not only know enough about you to do that, but also decided to do it at exactly the same time? No way. It's one person. The same one. The one who is making the army is the one who stole my scent."

Alice wasn't accustomed to being taking by surprise. She froze, and was still for so long that I started counting in my head as I waited. She didn't move for two minutes straight. Then her eyes refocused on me.

"You're right," she said in a hollow tone. "Of course you're right. And when you put it that way… ."

"Edward had it wrong," I whispered. "It was a test … to see if it would work. If he could get in and out safely as long as he didn't do anything you would be watching out for. Like trying to kill me… . And he didn't take my things to prove he'd found me. He stole my scent … so that others could find me."

Her eyes were wide with shock. I was right, and I could see that she knew it, too.

"Oh, no," she mouthed.

I was through expecting my emotions to make sense anymore. As I processed the fact that someone had created an army of vampires — the army that had gruesomely murdered dozens of people in Seattle — for the express purpose of destroying me, I felt a spasm of relief.

Part of it was finally solving that irritating feeling that I was missing something vital.

But the larger part was something else entirely.

"Well," I whispered, "everyone can relax. Nobody's trying to exterminate the Cullens after all."

"If you think that one thing has changed, you're absolutely wrong," Alice said through her teeth. "If someone wants one of us, they're going to have to go through the rest of us to get to her."

"Thanks, Alice. But at least we know what they're really after. That has to help."

“Maybe,” she muttered. She started pacing back and forth across my room.

Thud, thud — a fist hammered against my door.

I jumped. Alice didn’t seem to notice.

“Aren’t you ready yet? We’re gonna be late!” Charlie complained, sounding edgy. Charlie hated occasions about as much as I did. In his case, a lot of the problem was having to dress up.

“Almost. Give me a minute,” I said hoarsely.

He was quiet for half a second. “Are you crying?”

“No. I’m nervous. Go away.”

I heard him clump down the stairs.

“I have to go,” Alice whispered.

“Why?”

“Edward is coming. If he hears this ...”

“Go, go!” I urged immediately. Edward would go berserk when he knew. I couldn’t keep it from him for long, but maybe the graduation ceremony wasn’t the best time for his reaction.

“Put it on,” Alice commanded as she flitted out the window.

I did what she said, dressing in a daze.

I’d been planning to do something more sophisticated with my hair, but time was up, so it hung straight and boring as on any other day. It didn’t matter. I

didn't bother to look in the mirror, so I had no idea how Alice's sweater and skirt ensemble worked. That didn't matter, either. I threw the ugly yellow polyester graduation robe over my arm and hurried down the stairs.

"You look nice," Charlie said, already gruff with suppressed emotion. "Is that new?"

"Yeah," I mumbled, trying to concentrate. "Alice gave it to me. Thanks."

Edward arrived just a few minutes after his sister left. It wasn't enough time for me to pull together a calm façade. But, since we were riding in the cruiser with Charlie, he never had a chance to ask me what was wrong.

Charlie had gotten stubborn last week when he'd learned that I was intending to ride with Edward to the graduation ceremony. And I could see his point — parents should have some rights come graduation day. I'd conceded with good grace, and Edward had cheerfully suggested that we all go together. Since Carlisle and Esme had no problem with this, Charlie couldn't come up with a compelling objection; he'd agreed with poor grace. And now Edward rode in the backseat of my father's police car, behind the fiberglass divider, with an amused expression — probably due to my father's amused expression, and the grin that widened every time Charlie stole a glance at Edward in his rearview mirror. Which almost certainly meant that Charlie was imagining things that would get him in trouble with me if he said them out loud.

"Are you all right?" Edward whispered when he helped me from the front seat in the school parking lot.

“Nervous,” I answered, and it wasn’t even a lie.

“You are so beautiful,” he said.

He looked like he wanted to say more, but Charlie, in an obvious maneuver that he meant to be subtle, shrugged in between us and put his arm around my shoulders.

“Are you excited?” he asked me.

“Not really,” I admitted.

“Bella, this is a big deal. You’re graduating from high school. It’s the real world for you now. College. Living on your own… . You’re not my little girl anymore.” Charlie choked up a bit at the end.

“Dad,” I moaned. “Please don’t get all weepy on me.”

“Who’s weepy?” he growled. “Now, why aren’t you excited?”

“I don’t know, Dad. I guess it hasn’t hit yet or something.”

“It’s good that Alice is throwing this party. You need something to perk you up.”

“Sure. A party’s exactly what I need.”

Charlie laughed at my tone and squeezed my shoulders. Edward looked at the clouds, his face thoughtful.

My father had to leave us at the back door of the gym and go around to the main entrance with the rest of the parents.

It was pandemonium as Ms. Cope from the front office and Mr. Varner the math teacher tried to line everyone up alphabetically.

"Up front, Mr. Cullen," Mr. Varner barked at Edward.

"Hey, Bella!"

I looked up to see Jessica Stanley waving at me from the back of the line with a smile on her face.

Edward kissed me quickly, sighed, and went to go stand with the C's. Alice wasn't there. What was she going to do? Skip graduation? What poor timing on my part. I should have waited to figure things out until after this was over with.

"Down here, Bella!" Jessica called again.

I walked down the line to take my place behind Jessica, mildly curious as to why she was suddenly so friendly. As I got closer, I saw Angela five people back, watching Jessica with the same curiosity.

Jess was babbling before I was in earshot.

"... so amazing. I mean, it seems like we just met, and now we're graduating together," she gushed. "Can you believe it's over? I feel like screaming!"

"So do I," I muttered.

"This is all just so incredible. Do you remember your first day here? We were friends, like, right away. From the first time we saw each other. Amazing. And now I'm off to California and you'll be in Alaska and I'm going to miss you so much! You have to promise that we'll get together sometimes! I'm so glad you're having a party. That's perfect. Because we really haven't

spent much time together in a while and now we're all leaving… ."

She droned on and on, and I was sure the sudden return of our friendship was due to graduation nostalgia and gratitude for the party invite, not that I'd had anything to do with that. I paid attention as well as I could while I shrugged into my robe. And I found that I was glad that things could end on a good note with Jessica.

Because it was an ending, no matter what Eric, the valedictorian, had to say about commencement meaning "beginning" and all the rest of the trite nonsense. Maybe more for me than for the rest, but we were all leaving something behind us today.

It went so quickly. I felt like I'd hit the fast forward button. Were we supposed to march quite that fast? And then Eric was speed talking in his nervousness, the words and phrases running together so they didn't make sense anymore. Principal Greene started calling names, one after the other without a long enough pause between; the front row in the gymnasium was rushing to catch up. Poor Ms. Cope was all thumbs as she tried to give the principal the right diploma to hand to the right student.

I watched as Alice, suddenly appearing, danced across the stage to take hers, a look of deep concentration on her face. Edward followed behind, his expression confused, but not upset. Only the two of them could carry off the hideous yellow and still look the way they did. They stood out from the rest of the crowd, their beauty and grace otherworldly. I wondered how I'd ever fallen for their human farce. A couple of angels, standing there with wings intact, would be less conspicuous.

I heard Mr. Greene call my name and I rose from my chair, waiting for the line in front of me to move. I was conscious of cheering in the back of the gym, and I looked around to see Jacob pulling Charlie to his feet, both of them hooting in encouragement. I could just make out the top of Billy's head beside Jake's elbow. I managed to throw them an approximation of a smile.

Mr. Greene finished with the list of names, and then continued to hand out diplomas with a sheepish grin as we filed past.

"Congratulations, Miss Stanley," he mumbled as Jess took hers.

"Congratulations, Miss Swan," he mumbled to me, pressing the diploma into my good hand.

"Thanks," I murmured.

And that was it.

I went to stand next to Jessica with the assembled graduates. Jess was all red around the eyes, and she kept blotting her face with the sleeve of her robe. It took me a second to understand that she was crying.

Mr. Greene said something I didn't hear, and everyone around me shouted and screamed. Yellow hats rained down. I pulled mine off, too late, and just let it fall to the ground.

"Oh, Bella!" Jess blubbered over the sudden roar of conversation. "I can't believe we're done."

"I can't believe it's all over," I mumbled.

She threw her arms around my neck. "You have to promise we won't lose touch."

I hugged her back, feeling a little awkward as I dodged her request. “I’m so glad I know you, Jessica. It was a good two years.”

“It was,” she sighed, and sniffed. Then she dropped her arms. “Lauren!” she squealed, waving over her head and pushing through the massed yellow gowns. Families were beginning to converge, pressing us tighter together.

I caught sight of Angela and Ben, but they were surrounded by their families. I would congratulate them later.

I craned my head, looking for Alice.

“Congratulations,” Edward whispered in my ear, his arms winding around my waist. His voice was subdued; he’d been in no hurry for me to reach this particular milestone.

“Um, thanks.”

“You don’t look like you’re over the nerves yet,” he noted.

“Not quite yet.”

“What’s left to worry about? The party? It won’t be that horrible.”

“You’re probably right.”

“Who are you looking for?”

My searching wasn’t quite as subtle as I’d thought. “Alice — where is she?”

“She ran out as soon as she had her diploma.”

His voice took on a new tone. I looked up to see his confused expression as he stared toward the back door of the gym, and I made an impulse decision — the kind I really should think twice about, but rarely did.

“Worrying about Alice?” I asked.

“Er ...” He didn’t want to answer that.

“What was she thinking about, anyway? To keep you out, I mean.”

His eyes flashed down to my face, and narrowed in suspicion. “She was translating the Battle Hymn of the Republic into Arabic, actually. When she finished that, she moved on to Korean sign language.”

I laughed nervously. “I suppose that would keep her head busy enough.”

“You know what she’s hiding from me,” he accused.

“Sure.” I smiled a weak smile. “I’m the one who came up with it.”

He waited, confused.

I looked around. Charlie would be on his way through the crowd now.

“Knowing Alice,” I whispered in a rush, “she’ll probably try to keep this from you until after the party. But since I’m all for the party being canceled — well, don’t go berserk, regardless, okay? It’s always better to know as much as possible. It has to help somehow.”

“What are you talking about?”

I saw Charlie's head bob up over the other heads as he searched for me. He spotted me and waved.

"Just stay calm, okay?"

He nodded once, his mouth a grim line.

In hurried whispers I explained my reasoning to him. "I think you're wrong about things coming at us from all sides. I think it's mostly coming at us from one side … and I think it's coming at me, really. It's all connected, it has to be. It's just one person who's messing with Alice's visions. The stranger in my room was a test, to see if someone could get around her. It's got to be the same one who keeps changing his mind, and the newborns, and stealing my clothes — all of it goes together. My scent is for them."

His face had turned so white that I had a hard time finishing.

"But no one's coming for you, don't you see? This is good — Esme and Alice and Carlisle, no one wants to hurt them!"

His eyes were huge, wide with panic, dazed and horrified. He could see that I was right, just as Alice had.

I put my hand on his cheek. "Calm," I pleaded.

"Bella!" Charlie crowed, pushing his way past the close-packed families around us.

"Congratulations, baby!" He was still yelling, even though he was right at my ear now. He wrapped his arms around me, ever so slyly shuffling Edward off to the side as he did so.

“Thanks,” I muttered, preoccupied by the expression on Edward’s face. He still hadn’t gained control. His hands were halfway extended toward me, like he was about to grab me and make a run for it. Only slightly more in control of myself than he was, running didn’t seem like such a terrible idea to me.

“Jacob and Billy had to take off — did you see that they were here?” Charlie asked, taking a step back, but keeping his hands on my shoulders. He had his back to Edward — probably an effort to exclude him, but that was fine at the moment. Edward’s mouth was hanging open, his eyes still wide with dread.

“Yeah,” I assured my father, trying to pay enough attention. “Heard them, too.”

“It was nice of them to show up,” Charlie said.

“Mm-hmm.”

Okay, so telling Edward had been a really bad idea. Alice was right to keep her thoughts clouded. I should have waited till we were alone somewhere, maybe with the rest of his family. And nothing breakable close by — like windows … cars … school buildings. His face brought back all my fear and then some. Though his expression was past the fear now — it was pure fury that was suddenly plain on his features.

“So where do you want to go out for dinner?” Charlie asked. “The sky’s the limit.”

“I can cook.”

“Don’t be silly. Do you want to go to the Lodge?” he asked with an eager smile.

I did not particularly enjoy Charlie's favorite restaurant, but, at this point, what was the difference? I wasn't going to be able to eat anyway.

"Sure, the Lodge, cool," I said.

Charlie smiled wider, and then sighed. He turned his head halfway toward Edward, without really looking at him.

"You coming, too, Edward?"

I stared at him, my eyes beseeching. Edward pulled his expression together just before Charlie turned to see why he hadn't gotten an answer.

"No, thank you," Edward said stiffly, his face hard and cold.

"Do you have plans with your parents?" Charlie asked, a frown in his voice. Edward was always more polite than Charlie deserved; the sudden hostility surprised him.

"Yes. If you'll excuse me... ." Edward turned abruptly and stalked away through the dwindling crowd. He moved just a little bit too fast, too upset to keep up his usually perfect charade.

"What did I say?" Charlie asked with a guilty expression.

"Don't worry about it, Dad," I reassured him. "I don't think it's you."

"Are you two fighting again?"

"Nobody's fighting. Mind your own business."

“You are my business.”

I rolled my eyes. “Let’s go eat.”

The Lodge was crowded. The place was, in my opinion, overpriced and tacky, but it was the only thing close to a formal restaurant in town, so it was always popular for events. I stared morosely at a depressed-looking stuffed elk head while Charlie ate prime rib and talked over the back of the seat to Tyler Crowley’s parents. It was noisy — everyone there had just come from graduation, and most were chatting across the aisles and over the booth-tops like Charlie.

I had my back to the front windows, and I resisted the urge to turn around and search for the eyes I could feel on me now. I knew I wouldn’t be able to see anything. Just as I knew there was no chance that he would leave me unguarded, even for a second. Not after this.

Dinner dragged. Charlie, busy socializing, ate too slowly. I picked at my burger, stuffing pieces of it into my napkin when I was sure his attention was somewhere else. It all seemed to take a very long time, but when I looked at the clock — which I did more often than necessary — the hands hadn’t moved much.

Finally Charlie got his change back and put a tip on the table. I stood up.

“In a hurry?” he asked me.

“I want to help Alice set things up,” I claimed.

“Okay.” He turned away from me to say goodnight to everyone. I went out to wait by the cruiser.

I leaned against the passenger door, waiting for Charlie to drag himself away from the impromptu party. It was almost dark in the parking lot, the clouds so thick that there was no telling if the sun had set or not. The air felt heavy, like it was about to rain.

Something moved in the shadows.

My gasp turned into a sigh of relief as Edward appeared out of the gloom.

Without a word, he pulled me tightly against his chest. One cool hand found my chin, and pulled my face up so that he could press his hard lips to mine. I could feel the tension in his jaw.

“How are you?” I asked as soon as he let me breathe.

“Not so great,” he murmured. “But I’ve got a handle on myself. I’m sorry that I lost it back there.”

“My fault. I should have waited to tell you.”

“No,” he disagreed. “This is something I needed to know. I can’t believe I didn’t see it!”

“You’ve got a lot on your mind.”

“And you don’t?”

He suddenly kissed me again, not letting me answer. He pulled away after just a second. “Charlie’s on his way.”

“I’ll have him drop me at your house.”

“I’ll follow you there.”

“That’s not really necessary,” I tried to say, but he was already gone.

“Bella?” Charlie called from the doorway of the restaurant, squinting into the darkness.

“I’m out here.”

Charlie sauntered out to the car, muttering about impatience.

“So, how do you feel?” he asked me as we drove north along the highway. “It’s been a big day.”

“I feel fine,” I lied.

He laughed, seeing through me easily. “Worried about the party?” he guessed.

“Yeah,” I lied again.

This time he didn’t notice. “You were never one for the parties.”

“Wonder where I got that from,” I murmured.

Charlie chuckled. “Well, you look really nice. I wish I’d thought to get you something. Sorry.”

“Don’t be silly, Dad.”

“It’s not silly. I feel like I don’t always do everything for you that I should.”

“That’s ridiculous. You do a fantastic job. World’s best dad. And …” It wasn’t easy to talk about feelings with Charlie, but I persevered after clearing my throat. “And I’m really glad I came to live with you, Dad. It

was the best idea I ever had. So don't worry — you're just experiencing post-graduation pessimism."

He snorted. "Maybe. But I'm sure I slipped up in a few places. I mean, look at your hand!"

I stared down blankly at my hands. My left hand rested lightly on the dark brace I rarely thought about. My broken knuckle didn't hurt much anymore.

"I never thought I needed to teach you how to throw a punch. Guess I was wrong about that."

"I thought you were on Jacob's side?"

"No matter what side I'm on, if someone kisses you without your permission, you should be able to make your feelings clear without hurting yourself. You didn't keep your thumb inside your fist, did you?"

"No, Dad. That's kind of sweet in a weird way, but I don't think lessons would have helped. Jacob's head is really hard."

Charlie laughed. "Hit him in the gut next time."

"Next time?" I asked incredulously.

"Aw, don't be too hard on the kid. He's young."

"He's obnoxious."

"He's still your friend."

"I know." I sighed. "I don't really know what the right thing to do here is, Dad."

Charlie nodded slowly. "Yeah. The right thing isn't always real obvious. Sometimes the right thing for

one person is the wrong thing for someone else. So ... good luck figuring that out."

"Thanks," I muttered dryly.

Charlie laughed again, and then frowned. "If this party gets too wild ... ," he began.

"Don't worry about it, Dad. Carlisle and Esme are going to be there. I'm sure you can come, too, if you want."

Charlie grimaced as he squinted through the windshield into the night. Charlie enjoyed a good party just about as much as I did.

"Where's the turnoff, again?" he asked. "They ought to clear out their drive — it's impossible to find in the dark."

"Just around the next bend, I think." I pursed my lips. "You know, you're right — it is impossible to find. Alice said she put a map in the invitation, but even so, maybe everyone will get lost." I cheered up slightly at the idea.

"Maybe," Charlie said as the road curved to the east. "Or maybe not."

The black velvet darkness was interrupted ahead, just where the Cullens' drive should be. Someone had wrapped the trees on either side in thousands of twinkle lights, impossible to miss.

"Alice," I said sourly.

"Wow," Charlie said as we turned onto the drive. The two trees at the entry weren't the only ones lit. Every twenty feet or so, another shining beacon guided us

toward the big white house. All the way — all three miles of the way.

“She doesn’t do things halfway, does she?” Charlie mumbled in awe.

“Sure you don’t want to come in?”

“Extremely sure. Have fun, kid.”

“Thanks so much, Dad.”

He was laughing to himself as I got out and shut the door. I watched him drive away, still grinning. With a sigh, I marched up the stairs to endure my party.

# Chapter 17

## ALLIANCE

"Bella?"

Edward's soft voice came from behind me. I turned to see him spring lightly up the porch steps, his hair windblown from running. He pulled me into his arms at once, just like he had in the parking lot, and kissed me again.

This kiss frightened me. There was too much tension, too strong an edge to the way his lips crushed mine — like he was afraid we only had so much time left to us.

I couldn't let myself think about that. Not if I was going to have to act human for the next several hours. I pulled away from him.

"Let's get this stupid party over with," I mumbled, not meeting his eyes.

He put his hands on either side of my face, waiting until I looked up.

"I won't let anything happen to you."

I touched his lips with the fingers of my good hand. "I'm not worried about myself so much."

"Why am I not surprised by that?" he muttered to himself. He took a deep breath, and then he smiled slightly. "Ready to celebrate?" he asked.

I groaned.

He held the door for me, keeping his arm securely around my waist. I stood frozen there for a minute, then I slowly shook my head.

“Unbelievable.”

Edward shrugged. “Alice will be Alice.”

The interior of the Cullens’ home had been transformed into a nightclub — the kind that didn’t often exist in real life, only on TV.

“Edward!” Alice called from beside a gigantic speaker. “I need your advice.” She gestured toward a towering stack of CDs. “Should we give them familiar and comforting? Or” — she gestured to a different pile — “educate their taste in music?”

“Keep it comforting,” Edward recommended. “You can only lead the horse to water.”

Alice nodded seriously, and started throwing the educational CDs into a box. I noticed that she had changed into a sequined tank top and red leather pants. Her bare skin reacted oddly to the pulsing red and purple lights.

“I think I’m underdressed.”

“You’re perfect,” Edward disagreed.

“You’ll do,” Alice amended.

“Thanks.” I sighed. “Do you really think people will come?” Anyone could hear the hope in my voice. Alice made a face at me.

“Everyone will come,” Edward answered. “They’re all dying to see the inside of the reclusive Cullens’ mystery house.”

“Fabulous,” I moaned.

There wasn’t anything I could do to help. I doubted that — even after I didn’t need sleep and moved at a much faster speed — I would ever be able to get things done the way Alice did.

Edward refused to let me go for a second, dragging me along with him as he hunted up Jasper and then Carlisle to tell them of my epiphany. I listened with quiet horror as they discussed their attack on the army in Seattle. I could tell that Jasper was not pleased with the way the numbers stood, but they’d been unable to contact anyone besides Tanya’s unwilling family. Jasper didn’t try to hide his desperation the way Edward would have. It was easy to see that he didn’t like gambling with stakes this high.

I couldn’t stay behind, waiting and hoping for them to come home. I wouldn’t. I would go mad.

The doorbell rang.

All at once, everything was surreally normal. A perfect smile, genuine and warm, replaced the stress on Carlisle’s face. Alice turned the volume of the music up, and then danced to get the door.

It was a Suburban-load of my friends, either too nervous or too intimidated to arrive on their own. Jessica was the first one in the door, with Mike right behind her. Tyler, Conner, Austin, Lee, Samantha … even Lauren trailing in last, her critical eyes alight with curiosity. They all were curious, and then

overwhelmed as they took in the huge room decked out like a chic rave. The room wasn't empty; all the Cullens had taken their places, ready to put on their usual perfect human charade. Tonight I felt like I was acting every bit as much as they were.

I went to greet Jess and Mike, hoping the edge in my voice sounded like the right kind of excitement. Before I could get to anyone else, the bell rang again. I let Angela and Ben in, leaving the door wide, because Eric and Katie were just reaching the steps.

I didn't get another chance to panic. I had to talk to everyone, concentrate on being upbeat, a hostess. Though the party had been billed as a joint event for Alice, Edward, and me, there was no denying that I was the most popular target for congratulations and thanks. Maybe because the Cullens looked just slightly wrong under Alice's party lights. Maybe because those lights left the room dim and mysterious. Not an atmosphere to make your average human feel relaxed when standing next to someone like Emmett. I saw Emmett grin at Mike over the food table, the red lights gleaming off his teeth, and watched Mike take an automatic step back.

Probably Alice had done this on purpose, to force me into the center of attention — a place she thought I should enjoy more. She was forever trying to make me be human the way she thought humans should be.

The party was a clear success, despite the instinctive edginess cause by the Cullens' presence — or maybe that simply added a thrill to the atmosphere. The music was infectious, the lights almost hypnotic. From the way the food disappeared, that must have been good, too. The room was soon crowded, though never claustrophobic. The entire senior class seemed to be there, along with most of the juniors. Bodies

swayed to the beat that rumbled under the soles of their feet, the party constantly on the edge of breaking into a dance.

It wasn't as hard as I'd thought it would be. I followed Alice's lead, mingling and chatting for a minute with everyone. They seemed easy enough to please. I was sure this party was far cooler than anything the town of Forks had experienced before. Alice was almost purring — no one here would forget this night.

I'd circled the room once, and was back to Jessica. She babbled excitedly, and it was not necessary to pay strict attention, because the odds were she wouldn't need a response from me anytime soon. Edward was at my side — still refusing to let go of me. He kept one hand securely at my waist, pulling me closer now and then in response to thoughts I probably didn't want to hear.

So I was immediately suspicious when he dropped his arm and edged away from me.

"Stay here," he murmured in my ear. "I'll be right back."

He passed gracefully through the crowd without seeming to touch any of the close-packed bodies, gone too quickly for me to ask why he was leaving. I stared after him with narrowed eyes while Jessica shouted over the music eagerly, hanging on to my elbow, oblivious to my distraction.

I watched him as he reached the dark shadow beside the kitchen doorway, where the lights only shone intermittently. He was leaning over someone, but I couldn't see past all the heads between us.

I stretched up on my toes, craning my neck. Right then, a red light flashed across his back and glinted off the red sequins of Alice's shirt. The light only touched her face for half a second, but it was enough.

"Excuse me for a minute, Jess," I mumbled, pulling my arm away. I didn't pause for her reaction, even to see if I'd hurt her feelings with my abruptness.

I ducked my way through the bodies, getting shoved around a bit. A few people were dancing now. I hurried to the kitchen door.

Edward was gone, but Alice was still there in the dark, her face blank — the kind of expressionless look you see on the face of someone who has just witnessed a horrible accident. One of her hands gripped the door frame, like she needed the support.

"What, Alice, what? What did you see?" My hands were clutched in front of me — begging.

She didn't look at me, she was staring away. I followed her gaze and watched as she caught Edward's eye across the room. His face was empty as a stone. He turned and disappeared into the shadows under the stair.

The doorbell rang just then, hours after the last time, and Alice looked up with a puzzled expression that quickly turned into one of disgust.

"Who invited the werewolf?" she griped at me.

I scowled. "Guilty."

I'd thought I'd rescinded that invitation — not that I'd ever dreamed Jacob would come here, regardless.

“Well, you go take care of it, then. I have to talk to Carlisle.”

“No, Alice, wait!” I tried to reach for her arm, but she was gone and my hand clutched the empty air.

“Damn it!” I grumbled.

I knew this was it. Alice had seen what she’d been waiting for, and I honestly didn’t feel I could stand the suspense long enough to answer the door. The doorbell peeled again, too long, someone holding down the button. I turned my back toward the door resolutely, and scanned the darkened room for Alice.

I couldn’t see anything. I started pushing for the stairs.

“Hey, Bella!”

Jacob’s deep voice caught a lull in the music, and I looked up in spite of myself at the sound of my name.

I made a face.

It wasn’t just one werewolf, it was three. Jacob had let himself in, flanked on either side by Quil and Embry. The two of them looked terribly tense, their eyes flickering around the room like they’d just walked into a haunted crypt. Embry’s trembling hand still held the door, his body half-turned to run for it.

Jacob was waving at me, calmer than the others, though his nose was wrinkled in disgust. I waved back — waved goodbye — and turned to look for Alice. I squeezed through a space between Conner’s and Lauren’s backs.

He came out of nowhere, his hand on my shoulder pulling me back toward the shadow by the kitchen. I ducked under his grip, but he grabbed my good wrist and yanked me from the crowd.

“Friendly reception,” he noted.

I pulled my hand free and scowled at him. “What are you doing here?”

“You invited me, remember?”

“In case my right hook was too subtle for you, let me translate: that was me uninviting you.”

“Don’t be a poor sport. I brought you a graduation present and everything.”

I folded my arms across my chest. I didn’t want to fight with Jacob right now. I wanted to know what Alice had seen and what Edward and Carlisle were saying about it. I craned my head around Jacob, searching for them.

“Take it back to the store, Jake. I’ve got to do something... .”

He stepped into my line of sight, demanding my attention.

“I can’t take it back. I didn’t get it from the store — I made it myself. Took a really long time, too.”

I leaned around him again, but I couldn’t see any of the Cullens. Where had they gone? My eyes scanned the darkened room.

“Oh, c’mon, Bell. Don’t pretend like I’m not here!”

"I'm not." I couldn't see them anywhere. "Look, Jake, I've got a lot on my mind right now."

He put his hand under my chin and pulled my face up. "Could I please have just a few seconds of your undivided attention, Miss Swan?"

I jerked away from his touch. "Keep your hands to yourself, Jacob," I hissed.

"Sorry!" he said at once, holding his hands up in surrender. "I really am sorry. About the other day, I mean, too. I shouldn't have kissed you like that. It was wrong. I guess … well, I guess I deluded myself into thinking you wanted me to."

"Deluded — what a perfect description!"

"Be nice. You could accept my apology, you know."

"Fine. Apology accepted. Now, if you'll just excuse me for a moment …"

"Okay," he mumbled, and his voice was so different from before that I stoppd searching for Alice and scrutinized his face. He was staring at the floor, hiding his eyes. His lower lip jutted out just a little bit.

"I guess you'd rather be with your real friends," he said in the same defeated tone. "I get it."

I groaned. "Aw, Jake, you know that's not fair."

"Do I?"

"You should." I leaned forward, peering up, trying to look into his eyes. He looked up then, over my head, avoiding my gaze.

“Jake?”

He refused to look at me.

“Hey, you said you made me something, right?” I asked. “Was that just talk? Where’s my present?” My attempt to fake enthusiasm was pretty sad, but it worked. He rolled his eyes and then grimaced at me.

I kept up the lame pretense, holding my hand open in front of me. “I’m waiting.”

“Right,” he grumbled sarcastically. But he also reached into the back pocket of his jeans and pulled out a small bag of a loose-woven, multi-colored fabric. It was tied shut with leather drawstrings. He set it on my palm.

“Hey, that’s pretty, Jake. Thanks!”

He sighed. “The present is inside, Bella.”

“Oh.”

I had some trouble with the strings. He sighed again and took it from me, sliding the ties open with one easy tug of the right cord. I held my hand out for it, but he turned the bag upside down and shook something silver into my hand. Metal links clinked quietly against each other.

“I didn’t make the bracelet,” he admitted. “Just the charm.”

Fastened to one of the links of the silver bracelet was a tiny wooden carving. I held it between my fingers to look at it closer. It was amazing the amount of detail involved in the little figurine — the miniature wolf was

utterly realistic. It was even carved out of some red-brown wood that matched the color of his skin.

"It's beautiful," I whispered. "You made this? How?"

He shrugged. "It's something Billy taught me. He's better at it than I am."

"That's hard to believe," I murmured, turning the tiny wolf around and around in my fingers.

"Do you really like it?"

"Yes! It's unbelievable, Jake."

He smiled, happily at first, but then the expression soured. "Well, I figured that maybe it would make you remember me once in a while. You know how it is, out of sight, out of mind."

I ignored the attitude. "Here, help me put it on."

I held out my left wrist, since the right was stuck in the brace. He fastened the catch easily, though it looked too delicate for his big fingers to manage.

"You'll wear it?" he asked.

"Of course I will."

He grinned at me — it was the happy smile that I loved to see him wear.

I returned it for a moment, but then my eyes shot reflexively around the room again, anxiously scanning the crowd for some sign of Edward or Alice.

"Why're you so distracted?" Jacob wondered.

"It's nothing," I lied, trying to concentrate. "Thanks for the present, really. I love it."

"Bella?" His brows pulled together, throwing his eyes deep into their shadow. "Something's going on, isn't it?"

"Jake, I … no, there's nothing."

"Don't lie to me, you suck at lying. You should tell me what's going on. We want to know these things," he said, slipping into the plural at the end.

He was probably right; the wolves would certainly be interested in what was happening. Only I wasn't sure what that was yet. I wouldn't know for sure until I found Alice.

"Jacob, I will tell you. Just let me figure out what's happening, okay? I need to talk to Alice."

Understanding lit his expression. "The psychic saw something."

"Yes, just when you showed up."

"Is this about the bloodsucker in your room?" he murmured, pitching his voice below the thrum of the music.

"It's related," I admitted.

He processed that for a minute, leaning his head to one side while he read my face. "You know something you're not telling me … something big."

What was the point in lying again? He knew me too well. "Yes."

Jacob stared at me for one short moment, and then turned to catch his pack brothers' eyes where they stood in the entry, awkward and uncomfortable. When they took in his expression, they started moving, weaving their way agilely through the partiers, almost like they were dancing, too. In half a minute, they stood on either side of Jacob, towering over me.

"Now. Explain," Jacob demanded.

Embry and Quil looked back and forth between our faces, confused and wary.

"Jacob, I don't know everything." I kept searching the room, now for a rescue. They had me backed into a corner in every sense.

"What you do know, then."

They all folded their arms across their chests at exactly the same moment. It was a little bit funny, but mostly menacing.

And then I caught sight of Alice descending the stairs, her white skin glowing in the purple light.

"Alice!" I squeaked in relief.

She looked right at me as soon as I called her name, despite the thudding bass that should have drowned my voice. I waved eagerly, and watched her face as she took in the three werewolves leaning over me. Her eyes narrowed.

But, before that reaction, her face was full of stress and fear. I bit my lip as she skipped to my side.

Jacob, Quil, and Embry all leaned away from her with uneasy expressions. She put her arm around my waist.

“I need to talk to you,” she murmured into my ear.

“Er, Jake, I’ll see you later … ,” I mumbled as we eased around them.

Jacob threw his long arm out to block our way, bracing his hand against the wall. “Hey, not so fast.”

Alice stared up at him, eyes wide and incredulous. “Excuse me?”

“Tell us what’s going on,” he demanded in a growl.

Jasper appeared quite literally out of nowhere. One second it was just Alice and me against the wall, Jacob blocking our exit, and then Jasper was standing on the other side of Jake’s arm, his expression terrifying.

Jacob slowly pulled his arm back. It seemed like the best move, going with the assumption that he wanted to keep that arm.

“We have a right to know,” Jacob muttered, still glaring at Alice.

Jasper stepped in between them, and the three werewolves braced themselves.

“Hey, hey,” I said, adding a slightly hysterical chuckle. “This is a party, remember?”

Nobody paid any attention to me. Jacob glared at Alice while Jasper glowered at Jacob. Alice’s face was suddenly thoughtful.

“It’s okay, Jasper. He actually has a point.”

Jasper did not relax his position.

I was sure the suspense was going to make my head explode in about one second. “What did you see, Alice?”

She stared at Jacob for one second, and then turned to me, evidently having chosen to let them hear.

“The decision’s been made.”

“You’re going to Seattle?”

“No.”

I felt the color drain out of my face. My stomach lurched. “They’re coming here,” I choked out.

The Quileute boys watched silently, reading every unconscious play of emotion on our faces. They were rooted in place, and yet not completely still. All three pairs of hands were trembling.

“Yes.”

“To Forks,” I whispered.

“Yes.”

“For?”

She nodded, understanding my question. “One carried your red shirt.”

I tried to swallow.

Jasper's expression was disapproving. I could tell he didn't like discussing this in front of the werewolves, but he had something he needed to say. "We can't let them come that far. There aren't enough of us to protect the town."

"I know," Alice said, her face suddenly desolate. "But it doesn't matter where we stop them. There still won't be enough of us, and some of them will come here to search."

"No!" I whispered.

The noise of the party overwhelmed the sound of my denial. All around us, my friends and neighbors and petty enemies ate and laughed and swayed to the music, oblivious to the fact that they were about to face horror, danger, maybe death. Because of me.

"Alice," I mouthed her name. "I have to go, I have to get away from here."

"That won't help. It's not like we're dealing with a tracker. They'll still come looking here first."

"Then I have to go to meet them!" If my voice hadn't been so hoarse and strained, it might have been a shriek. "If they find what they're looking for, maybe they'll go away and not hurt anyone else!"

"Bella!" Alice protested.

"Hold it," Jacob ordered in a low, forceful voice. "What is coming?"

Alice turned her icy gaze on him. "Our kind. Lots of them."

"Why?"

"For Bella. That's all we know."

"There are too many for you?" he asked.

Jasper bridled. "We have a few advantages, dog. It will be an even fight."

"No," Jacob said, and a strange, fierce half-smile spread across his face. "It won't be even."

"Excellent!" Alice hissed.

I stared, still frozen in horror, at Alice's new expression. Her face was alive with exultation, all the despair wiped clean from her perfect features.

She grinned at Jacob, and he grinned back.

"Everything just disappeared, of course," she told him in a smug voice. "That's inconvenient, but, all things considered, I'll take it."

"We'll have to coordinate," Jacob said. "It won't be easy for us. Still, this is our job more than yours."

"I wouldn't go that far, but we need the help. We aren't going to be picky."

"Wait, wait, wait, wait," I interrupted them.

Alice was on her toes, Jacob leaning down toward her, both of their faces lit up with excitement, both of their noses wrinkled against the smell. They looked at me impatiently.

"Coordinate?" I repeated through my teeth.

"You didn't honestly think you were going to keep us out of this?" Jacob asked.

"You are staying out of this!"

"Your psychic doesn't think so."

"Alice — tell them no!" I insisted. "They'll get killed!"

Jacob, Quil, and Embry all laughed out loud.

"Bella," Alice said, her voice soothing, placating, "separately we all could get killed. Together —"

"It'll be no problem," Jacob finished her sentence. Quil laughed again.

"How many?" Quil asked eagerly.

"No!" I shouted.

Alice didn't even look at me. "It changes — twenty-one today, but the numbers are going down."

"Why?" Jacob asked, curious.

"Long story," Alice said, suddenly looking around the room. "And this isn't the place for it."

"Later tonight?" Jacob pushed.

"Yes," Jasper answered him. "We were already planning a … strategic meeting. If you're going to fight with us, you'll need some instruction."

The wolves all made a disgruntled face at the last part.

"No!" I moaned.

"This will be odd," Jasper said thoughtfully. "I never considered working together. This has to be a first."

"No doubt about that," Jacob agreed. He was in a hurry now. "We've got to get back to Sam. What time?"

"What's too late for you?"

All three rolled their eyes. "What time?" Jacob repeated.

"Three o'clock?"

"Where?"

"About ten miles due north of the Hoh Forest ranger station. Come at it from the west and you'll be able to follow our scent in."

"We'll be there."

They turned to leave.

"Wait, Jake!" I called after him. "Please! Don't do this!"

He paused, turning back to grin at me, while Quil and Embry headed impatiently for the door. "Don't be ridiculous, Bells. You're giving me a much better gift than the one I gave you."

"No!" I shouted again. The sound of an electric guitar drowned my cry.

He didn't respond; he hurried to catch up with his friends, who were already gone. I watched helplessly as Jacob disappeared.

# Chapter 18

## INSTRUCTION

"That had to be the longest party in the history of the world," I complained on the way home.

Edward didn't seem to disagree. "It's over now," he said, rubbing my arm soothingly.

Because I was the only one who needed soothing. Edward was fine now — all the Cullens were fine.

They'd all reassured me; Alice reaching up to pat my head as I left, eyeing Jasper meaningfully until a flood of peace swirled around me, Esme kissing my forehead and promising me everything was all right, Emmett laughing boisterously and asking why I was the only one who was allowed to fight with werewolves... . Jacob's solution had them all relaxed, almost euphoric after the long weeks of stress. Doubt had been replaced with confidence. The party had ended on a note of true celebration.

Not for me.

Bad enough — horrible — that the Cullens would fight for me. It was already too much that I would have to allow that. It already felt like more than I could bear.

Not Jacob, too. Not his foolish, eager brothers — most of them even younger than I was. They were just oversized, over-muscled children, and they looked forward to this like it was picnic on the beach. I could not have them in danger, too. My nerves felt frayed and exposed. I didn't know how much longer I could restrain the urge to scream out loud.

I whispered now, to keep my voice under control. “You’re taking me with you tonight.”

“Bella, you’re worn out.”

“You think I could sleep?”

He frowned. “This is an experiment. I’m not sure if it will be possible for us all to … cooperate. I don’t want you in the middle of that.”

As if that didn’t make me all the more anxious to go. “If you won’t take me, then I’ll call Jacob.”

His eyes tightened. That was a low blow, and I knew it. But there was no way I was being left behind.

He didn’t answer; we were at Charlie’s house now. The front light was on.

“See you upstairs,” I muttered.

I tiptoed in the front door. Charlie was asleep in the living room, overflowing the too-small sofa, and snoring so loudly I could have ripped a chainsaw to life and it wouldn’t have wakened him.

I shook his shoulder vigorously.

“Dad! Charlie!”

He grumbled, eyes still closed.

“I’m home now — you’re going to hurt your back sleeping like that. C’mon, time to move.”

It took a few more shakes, and his eyes never did open all the way, but I managed to get him off the couch. I helped him up to his bed, where he collapsed

on top of the covers, fully dressed, and started snoring again.

He wasn't going to be looking for me anytime soon.

Edward waited in my room while I washed my face and changed into jeans and a flannel shirt. He watched me unhappily from the rocking chair as I hung the outfit Alice had given me in my closet.

"Come here," I said, taking his hand and pulling him to my bed.

I pushed him down on the bed and then curled up against his chest. Maybe he was right and I was tired enough to sleep. I wasn't going to let him sneak off without me.

He tucked my quilt in around me, and then held me close.

"Please relax."

"Sure."

"This is going to work, Bella. I can feel it."

My teeth locked together.

He was still radiating relief. Nobody but me cared if Jacob and his friends got hurt. Not even Jacob and his friends. Especially not them.

He could tell I was about to lose it. "Listen to me, Bella. This is going to be easy. The newborns will be completely taken by surprise. They'll have no more idea that werewolves even exist than you did. I've seen how they act in a group, the way Jasper remembers. I truly believe that the wolves' hunting

techniques will work flawlessly against them. And with them divided and confused, there won't be enough for the rest of us to do. Someone may have to sit out," he teased.

"Piece of cake," I mumbled tonelessly against his chest.

"Shhh," he stroked my cheek. "You'll see. Don't worry now."

He started humming my lullaby, but, for once, it didn't calm me.

People — well, vampires and werewolves really, but still — people I loved were going to get hurt. Hurt because of me. Again. I wished my bad luck would focus a little more carefully. I felt like yelling up at the empty sky: It's me you want — over here! Just me!

I tried to think of a way that I could do exactly that — force my bad luck to focus on me. It wouldn't be easy. I would have to wait, bide my time… .

I did not fall asleep. The minutes passed quickly, to my surprise, and I was still alert and tense when Edward pulled us both up into a sitting position.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay and sleep?"

I gave him a sour look.

He sighed, and scooped me up in his arms before he jumped from my window.

He raced through the black, quiet forest with me on his back, and even in his run I could feel the elation. He ran the way he did when it was just us, just for enjoyment, just for the feel of the wind in his hair. It

was the kind of thing that, during less anxious times, would have made me happy.

When we got to the big open field, his family was there, talking casually, relaxed. Emmett's booming laugh echoed through the wide space now and then. Edward set me down and we walked hand in hand toward them.

It took me a minute, because it was so dark with the moon hidden behind the clouds, but I realized that we were in the baseball clearing. It was the same place where, more than a year ago, that first lighthearted evening with the Cullens had been interrupted by James and his coven. It felt strange to be here again — as if this gathering wouldn't be complete until James and Laurent and Victoria joined us. But James and Laurent were never coming back. That pattern wouldn't be repeated. Maybe all the patterns were broken.

Yes, someone had broken out of their pattern. Was it possible that the Volturi were the flexible ones in this equation?

I doubted it.

Victoria had always seemed like a force of nature to me — like a hurricane moving toward the coast in a straight line — unavoidable, implacable, but predictable. Maybe it was wrong to limit her that way. She had to be capable of adaptation.

"You know what I think?" I asked Edward.

He laughed. "No."

I almost smiled.

“What do you think?”

“I think it’s all connected. Not just the two, but all three.”

“You’ve lost me.”

“Three bad things have happened since you came back.” I ticked them off on my fingers. “The newborns in Seattle. The stranger in my room. And — first of all — Victoria came to look for me.”

His eyes narrowed as he thought about it. “Why do you think so?”

“Because I agree with Jasper — the Volturi love their rules. They would probably do a better job anyway.” And I’d be dead if they wanted me dead, I added mentally. “Remember when you were tracking Victoria last year?”

“Yes.” He frowned. “I wasn’t very good at it.”

“Alice said you were in Texas. Did you follow her there?”

His eyebrows pulled together. “Yes. Hmm ...”

“See — she could have gotten the idea there. But she doesn’t know what she’s doing, so the newborns are all out of control.”

He started shaking his head. “Only Aro knows exactly how Alice’s visions work.”

“Aro would know best, but wouldn’t Tanya and Irina and the rest of your friends in Denali know enough? Laurent lived with them for so long. And if he was still friendly enough with Victoria to be doing favors for

her, why wouldn't he also tell her everything he knew?"

Edward frowned. "It wasn't Victoria in your room."

"She can't make new friends? Think about it, Edward. If it is Victoria doing this in Seattle, she's made a lot of new friends. She's created them."

He considered it, his forehead creased in concentration.

"Hmm," he finally said. "It's possible. I still think the Volturi are most likely ... But your theory — there's something there. Victoria's personality. Your theory suits her personality perfectly. She's shown a remarkable gift for self-preservation from the start — maybe it's a talent of hers. In any case, this plot would put her in no danger at all from us, if she sits safely behind and lets the newborns wreak their havoc here. And maybe little danger from the Volturi, either. Perhaps she's counting on us to win, in the end, though certainly not without heavy casualties of our own. But no survivors from her little army to bear witness against her. In fact," he continued, thinking it through, "if there were survivors, I'd bet she'd be planning to destroy them herself... . Hmm. Still, she'd have to have at least one friend who was a bit more mature. No fresh-made newborn left your father alive... ."

He frowned into space for a long moment, and then suddenly smiled at me, coming back from his reverie. "Definitely possible. Regardless, we've got to be prepared for anything until we know for sure. You're very perceptive today," he added. "It's impressive."

I sighed. “Maybe I’m just reacting to this place. It makes me feel like she’s close by … like she sees me now.”

His jaw muscles tensed at the idea. “She’ll never touch you, Bella,” he said.

In spite of his words, his eyes swept carefully across the dark trees. While he searched their shadows, the strangest expression crossed his face. His lips pulled back over his teeth and his eyes shone with an odd light — a wild, fierce kind of hope.

“Yet, what I wouldn’t give to have her that close,” he murmured. “Victoria, and anyone else who’s ever thought of hurting you. To have the chance to end this myself. To finish it with my own hands this time.”

I shuddered at the ferocious longing in his voice, and clenched his fingers more tightly with mine, wishing I was strong enough to lock our hands together permanently.

We were almost to his family, and I noticed for the first time that Alice did not look as optimistic as the others. She stood a little aside, watching Jasper stretching his arms as if he were warming up to exercise, her lips pushed out in a pout.

“Is something wrong with Alice?” I whispered.

Edward chuckled, himself again. “The werewolves are on their way, so she can’t see anything that will happen now. It makes her uncomfortable to be blind.”

Alice, though the farthest from us, heard his low voice. She looked up and stuck her tongue out at him. He laughed again.

“Hey, Edward,” Emmett greeted him. “Hey, Bella. Is he going to let you practice, too?”

Edward groaned at his brother. “Please, Emmett, don’t give her any ideas.”

“When will our guests arrive?” Carlisle asked Edward.

Edward concentrated for a moment, and then sighed. “A minute and a half. But I’m going to have to translate. They don’t trust us enough to use their human forms.”

Carlisle nodded. “This is hard for them. I’m grateful they’re coming at all.”

I stared at Edward, my eyes stretched wide. “They’re coming as wolves?”

He nodded, cautious of my reaction. I swallowed once, remembering the two times I’d seen Jacob in his wolf form — the first time in the meadow with Laurent, the second time on the forest lane where Paul had gotten angry at me… . They were both memories of terror.

A strange gleam came into Edward’s eyes, as though something had just occurred to him, something that was not altogether unpleasant. He turned away quickly, before I could see any more, back to Carlisle and the others.

“Prepare yourselves — they’ve been holding out on us.”

“What do you mean?” Alice demanded.

“Shh,” he cautioned, and stared past her into the darkness.

The Cullens' informal circle suddenly widened out into a loose line with Jasper and Emmett at the spear point. From the way Edward leaned forward next to me, I could tell that he wished he was standing beside them. I tightened my hand around his.

I squinted toward the forest, seeing nothing.

"Damn," Emmett muttered under his breath. "Did you ever see anything like it?"

Esme and Rosalie exchanged a wide-eyed glance.

"What is it?" I whispered as quietly as I could. "I can't see."

"The pack has grown," Edward murmured into my ear.

Hadn't I told him that Quil had joined the pack? I strained to see the six wolves in the gloom. Finally, something glittered in the blackness — their eyes, higher up than they should be. I'd forgotten how very tall the wolves were. Like horses, only thick with muscle and fur — and teeth like knives, impossible to overlook.

I could only see the eyes. And as I scanned, straining to see more, it occurred to me that there were more than six pairs facing us. One, two, three … I counted the pairs swiftly in my head. Twice.

There were ten of them.

"Fascinating," Edward murmured almost silently.

Carlisle took a slow, deliberate step forward. It was a careful movement, designed to reassure.

"Welcome," he greeted the invisible wolves.

"Thank you," Edward responded in a strange, flat tone, and I realized at once that the words came from Sam. I looked to the eyes shining in the center of the line, the highest up, the tallest of them all. It was impossible to separate the shape of the big black wolf from the darkness.

Edward spoke again in the same detached voice, speaking Sam's words. "We will watch and listen, but no more. That is the most we can ask of our self-control."

"That is more than enough," Carlisle answered. "My son Jasper" — he gestured to where Jasper stood, tensed and ready — "has experience in this area. He will teach us how they fight, how they are to be defeated. I'm sure you can apply this to your own hunting style."

"They are different from you?" Edward asked for Sam.

Carlisle nodded. "They are all very new — only months old to this life. Children, in a way. They will have no skill or strategy, only brute strength. Tonight their numbers stand at twenty. Ten for us, ten for you — it shouldn't be difficult. The numbers may go down. The new ones fight amongst themselves."

A rumble passed down the shadowy line of wolves, a low growling mutter that somehow managed to sound enthusiastic.

"We are willing to take more than our share, if necessary," Edward translated, his tone less indifferent now.

Carlisle smiled. "We'll see how it plays out."

"Do you know when and how they'll arrive?"

"They'll come across the mountains in four days, in the late morning. As they approach, Alice will help us intercept their path."

"Thank you for the information. We will watch."

With a sighing sound, the eyes sank closer to the ground one set at a time.

It was silent for two heartbeats, and then Jasper took a step into the empty space between the vampires and the wolves. It wasn't hard for me to see him — his skin was as bright against the darkness as the wolves' eyes. Jasper threw a wary glance toward Edward, who nodded, and then Jasper turned his back to the werewolves. He sighed, clearly uncomfortable.

"Carlisle's right." Jasper spoke only to us; he seemed to be trying to ignore the audience behind him. "They'll fight like children. The two most important things you'll need to remember are, first, don't let them get their arms around you and, second, don't go for the obvious kill. That's all they'll be prepared for. As long as you come at them from the side and keep moving, they'll be too confused to respond effectively. Emmett?"

Emmett stepped out of the line with a huge smile.

Jasper backed toward the north end of the opening between the allied enemies. He waved Emmett forward.

"Okay, Emmett first. He's the best example of a newborn attack."

Emmett's eyes narrowed. "I'll try not to break anything," he muttered.

Jasper grinned. "What I meant is that Emmett relies on his strength. He's very straightforward about the attack. The newborns won't be trying anything subtle, either. Just go for the easy kill, Emmett."

Jasper backed up a few more paces, his body tensing.

"Okay, Emmett — try to catch me."

And I couldn't see Jasper anymore — he was a blur as Emmett charged him like a bear, grinning while he snarled. Emmett was impossibly quick, too, but not like Jasper. It looked like Jasper had no more substance than a ghost — any time it seemed Emmett's big hands had him for sure, Emmett's fingers clenched around nothing but the air. Beside me, Edward leaned forward intently, his eyes locked on the brawl. Then Emmett froze.

Jasper had him from behind, his teeth an inch from his throat.

Emmett cussed.

There was a muttered rumble of appreciation from the watching wolves.

"Again," Emmett insisted, his smile gone.

"It's my turn," Edward protested. My fingers tensed around his.

"In a minute." Jasper grinned, stepping back. "I want to show Bella something first."

I watched with anxious eyes as he waved Alice forward.

“I know you worry about her,” he explained to me as she danced blithely into the ring. “I want to show you why that’s not necessary.”

Though I knew that Jasper would never allow any harm to come to Alice, it was still hard to watch as he sank back into a crouch facing her. Alice stood motionlessly, looking tiny as a doll after Emmett, smiling to herself. Jasper shifted forward, then slinked to her left.

Alice closed her eyes.

My heart thumped unevenly as Jasper stalked toward where Alice stood.

Jasper sprang, disappearing. Suddenly he was on the other side of Alice. She didn’t appear to have moved.

Jasper wheeled and launched himself at her again, only to land in a crouch behind her like the first time; all the while Alice stood smiling with her eyes closed.

I watched Alice more carefully now.

She was moving — I’d just been missing it, distracted by Jasper’s attacks. She took a small step forward at the exact second that Jasper’s body flew through the spot where she’d just been standing. She took another step, while Jasper’s grasping hands whistled past where her waist had been.

Jasper closed in, and Alice began to move faster. She was dancing — spiraling and twisting and curling in on herself. Jasper was her partner, lunging, reaching through her graceful patterns, never touching her,

like every movement was choreographed. Finally, Alice laughed.

Out of nowhere she was perched on Jasper's back, her lips at his neck.

"Gotcha," she said, and kissed his throat.

Jasper chuckled, shaking his head. "You truly are one frightening little monster."

The wolves muttered again. This time the sound was wary.

"It's good for them to learn some respect," Edward murmured, amused. Then he spoke louder. "My turn."

He squeezed my hand before he let it go.

Alice came to take his place beside me. "Cool, huh?" she asked me smugly.

"Very," I agreed, not looking away from Edward as he glided noiselessly toward Jasper, his movements lithe and watchful as a jungle cat.

"I've got my eye on you, Bella," she whispered suddenly, her voice pitched so low that I could barely hear, though her lips were at my ear.

My gaze flickered to her face and then back to Edward. He was intent on Jasper, both of them feinting as he closed the distance.

Alice's expression was full of reproach.

"I'll warn him if your plans get any more defined," she threatened in the same low murmur. "It doesn't help

anything for you to put yourself in danger. Do you think either of them would give up if you died? They'd still fight, we all would. You can't change anything, so just be good, okay?"

I grimaced, trying to ignore her.

"I'm watching," she repeated.

Edward had closed on Jasper now, and this fight was more even than either of the others. Jasper had the century of experience to guide him, and he tried to go on instinct alone as much as he could, but his thoughts always gave him away a fraction of a second before he acted. Edward was slightly faster, but the moves Jasper used were unfamiliar to him. They came at each other again and again, neither one able to gain the advantage, instinctive snarls erupting constantly. It was hard to watch, but harder to look away. They moved too fast for me to really understand what they were doing. Now and then the sharp eyes of the wolves would catch my attention. I had a feeling the wolves were getting more out of this than I was — maybe more than they should.

Eventually, Carlisle cleared his throat.

Jasper laughed, and took a step back. Edward straightened up and grinned at him.

"Back to work," Jasper consented. "We'll call it a draw."

Everyone took turns, Carlisle, then Rosalie, Esme, and Emmett again. I squinted through my lashes, cringing as Jasper attacked Esme. That one was the hardest to watch. Then he slowed down, still not quite enough for me to understand his motions, and gave more instruction.

"You see what I'm doing here?" he would ask. "Yes, just like that," he encouraged. "Concentrate on the sides. Don't forget where their target will be. Keep moving."

Edward was always focused, watching and also listening to what others couldn't see.

It got more difficult to follow as my eyes got heavier. I hadn't been sleeping well lately, anyway, and it was approaching a solid twenty-four hours since the last time I'd slept. I leaned against Edward's side, and let my eyelids droop.

"We're about finished," he whispered.

Jasper confirmed that, turning toward the wolves for the first time, his expression uncomfortable again. "We'll be doing this tomorrow. Please feel welcome to observe again."

"Yes," Edward answered in Sam's cool voice. "We'll be here."

Then Edward sighed, patted my arm, and stepped away from me. He turned to his family.

"The pack thinks it would be helpful to be familiar with each of our scents — so they don't make mistakes later. If we could hold very still, it will make it easier for them."

"Certainly," Carlisle said to Sam. "Whatever you need."

There was a gloomy, throaty grumble from the wolf pack as they all rose to their feet.

My eyes were wide again, exhaustion forgotten.

The deep black of the night was just beginning to fade — the sun brightening the clouds, though it hadn't cleared the horizon yet, far away on the other side of the mountains. As they approached, it was suddenly possible to make out shapes ... colors.

Sam was in the lead, of course. Unbelievably huge, black as midnight, a monster straight out of my nightmares — literally; after the first time I'd seen Sam and the others in the meadow, they'd starred in my bad dreams more than once.

Now that I could see them all, match the vastness with each pair of eyes, it looked like more than ten. The pack was overwhelming.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that Edward was watching me, carefully evaluating my reaction.

Sam approached Carlisle where he stood in the front, the huge pack right on his tail. Jasper stiffened, but Emmett, on the other side of Carlisle, was grinning and relaxed.

Sam sniffed at Carlisle, seeming to wince slightly as he did. Then he moved on to Jasper.

My eyes ran down the wary brace of wolves. I was sure I could pick out a few of the new additions. There was a light gray wolf that was much smaller than the others, the hackles on the back of his neck raised in distaste. There was another, the color of desert sand, who seemed gangly and uncoordinated beside the rest. A low whine broke through the sandy wolf's control when Sam's advance left him isolated between Carlisle and Jasper.

I stopped at the wolf just behind Sam. His fur was reddish-brown and longer than the others, shaggy in

comparison. He was almost as tall as Sam, the second largest in the group. His stance was casual, somehow exuding nonchalance over what the rest obviously considered an ordeal.

The enormous russet-colored wolf seemed to feel my gaze, and he looked up at me with familiar black eyes.

I stared back at him, trying to believe what I already knew. I could feel the wonder and fascination on my face.

The wolf's muzzle fell open, pulling back over his teeth. It would have been a frightening expression, except that his tongue lolled out the side in a wolfy grin.

I giggled.

Jacob's grin widened over his sharp teeth. He left his place in line, ignoring the eyes of his pack as they followed him. He trotted past Edward and Alice to stand not two feet away from me. He stopped there, his gaze flickering briefly toward Edward.

Edward stood motionless, a statue, his eyes still assessing my reaction.

Jacob crouched down on his front legs and dropped his head so that his face was no higher than mine, staring at me, measuring my response just as much as Edward was.

"Jacob?" I breathed.

The answering rumble deep in his chest sounded like a chuckle.

I reached my hand out, my fingers trembling slightly, and touched the red-brown fur on the side of his face.

The black eyes closed, and Jacob leaned his huge head into my hand. A thrumming hum resonated in this throat.

The fur was both soft and rough, and warm against my skin. I ran my fingers through it curiously, learning the texture, stroking his neck where the color deepened. I hadn't realized how close I'd gotten; without warning, Jacob suddenly licked my face from chin to hairline.

"Ew! Gross, Jake!" I complained, jumping back and smacking at him, just as I would have if he were human. He dodged out of the way, and the coughing bark that came through his teeth was obviously laughter.

I wiped my face on the sleeve of my shirt, unable to keep from laughing with him.

It was at that point that I realized that everyone was watching us, the Cullens and the werewolves — the Cullens with perplexed and somewhat disgusted expressions. It was hard to read the wolves' faces. I thought Sam looked unhappy.

And then there was Edward, on edge and clearly disappointed. I realized he'd been hoping for a different reaction from me. Like screaming and running away in terror.

Jacob made the laughing sound again.

The other wolves were backing away now, not taking their eyes off the Cullens as they departed. Jacob stood by my side, watching them go. Soon, they

disappeared into the murky forest. Only two hesitated by the trees, watching Jacob, their postures radiating anxiety.

Edward sighed, and — ignoring Jacob — came to stand on my other side, taking my hand.

“Ready to go?” he asked me.

Before I could answer, he was staring over me at Jacob.

“I’ve not quite figured out all the details yet,” he said, answering a question in Jacob’s thoughts.

The Jacob-wolf grumbled sullenly.

“It’s more complicated than that,” Edward said. “Don’t concern yourself; I’ll make sure it’s safe.”

“What are you talking about?” I demanded.

“Just discussing strategy,” Edward said.

Jacob’s head swiveled back and forth, looking at our faces. Then, suddenly, he bolted for the forest. As he darted away, I noticed for the first time a square of folded black fabric secured to his back leg.

“Wait,” I called, one hand stretching out automatically to reach after him. But he disappeared into the trees in seconds, the other two wolves following.

“Why did he leave?” I asked, hurt.

“He’s coming back,” Edward said. He sighed. “He wants to be able to talk for himself.”

I watched the edge of the forest where Jacob had vanished, leaning into Edward's side again. I was on the point of collapse, but I was fighting it.

Jacob loped back into view, on two legs this time. His broad chest was bare, his hair tangled and shaggy. He wore only a pair of black sweat pants, his feet bare to the cold ground. He was alone now, but I suspected that his friends lingered in the trees, invisible.

It didn't take him long to cross the field, though he gave a wide berth to the Cullens, who stood talking quietly in a loose circle.

"Okay, bloodsucker," Jacob said when he was a few feet from us, evidently continuing the conversation I'd missed. "What's so complicated about it?"

"I have to consider every possibility," Edward said, unruffled. "What if someone gets by you?"

Jacob snorted at that idea. "Okay, so leave her on the reservation. We're making Collin and Brady stay behind anyway. She'll be safe there."

I scowled. "Are you talking about me?"

"I just want to know what he plans to do with you during the fight," Jacob explained.

"Do with me?"

"You can't stay in Forks, Bella." Edward's voice was pacifying. "They know where to look for you there. What if someone slipped by us?"

My stomach dropped and the blood drained from my face. "Charlie?" I gasped.

"He'll be with Billy," Jacob assured me quickly. "If my dad has to commit a murder to get him there, he'll do it. Probably it won't take that much. It's this Saturday, right? There's a game."

"This Saturday?" I asked, my head spinning. I was too lightheaded to control my wildly random thoughts. I frowned at Edward. "Well, crap! There goes your graduation present."

Edward laughed. "It's the thought that counts," he reminded me. "You can give the tickets to someone else."

Inspiration came swiftly. "Angela and Ben," I decided at once. "At least that will get them out of town."

He touched my cheek. "You can't evacuate everyone," he said in a gentle voice. "Hiding you is just a precaution. I told you — we'll have no problem now. There won't be enough of them to keep us entertained."

"But what about keeping her in La Push?" Jacob interjected, impatient.

"She's been back and forth too much," Edward said. "She's left trails all over the place. Alice only sees very young vampires coming on the hunt, but obviously someone created them. There is someone more experienced behind this. Whoever he" — Edward paused to look at me — "or she is, this could all be a distraction. Alice will see if he decides to look himself, but we could be very busy at the time that decision is made. Maybe someone is counting on that. I can't leave her somewhere she's been frequently. She has to be hard to find, just in case. It's a very long shot, but I'm not taking chances."

I stared at Edward as he explained, my forehead creasing. He patted my arm.

“Just being overcautious,” he promised.

Jacob gestured to the deep forest east of us, to the vast expanse of the Olympic Mountains.

“So hide her here,” he suggested. “There’s a million possibilities — places either one of us could be in just a few minutes if there’s a need.”

Edward shook his head. “Her scent is too strong and, combined with mine, especially distinct. Even if I carried her, it would leave a trail. Our trace is all over the range, but in conjunction with Bella’s scent, it would catch their attention. We’re not sure exactly which path they’ll take, because they don’t know yet. If they crossed her scent before they found us ...”

Both of them grimaced at the same time, their eyebrows pulling together.

“You see the difficulties.”

“There has to be a way to make it work,” Jacob muttered. He glared toward the forest, pursing his lips.

I swayed on my feet. Edward put his arm around my waist, pulling me closer and supporting my weight.

“I need to get you home — you’re exhausted. And Charlie will be waking up soon… .”

“Wait a sec,” Jacob said, wheeling back to us, his eyes bright. “My scent disgusts you, right?”

"Hmm, not bad." Edward was two steps ahead. "It's possible." He turned toward his family. "Jasper?" he called.

Jasper looked up curiously. He walked over with Alice a half step behind. Her face was frustrated again.

"Okay, Jacob." Edward nodded at him.

Jacob turned toward me with a strange mixture of emotion on his face. He was clearly excited by whatever this new plan of his was, but he was also still uneasy so close to his enemy allies. And then it was my turn to be wary as he held his arms out toward me.

Edward took a deep breath.

"We're going to see if I can confuse the scent enough to hide your trail," Jacob explained.

I stared at his open arms suspiciously.

"You're going to have to let him carry you, Bella," Edward told me. His voice was calm, but I could hear the subdued distaste.

I frowned.

Jacob rolled his eyes, impatient, and reached down to yank me up into his arms.

"Don't be such a baby," he muttered.

But his eyes flickered to Edward, just like mine did. Edward's face was composed and smooth. He spoke to Jasper.

“Bella’s scent is so much more potent to me — I thought it would be a fairer test if someone else tried.”

Jacob turned away from them and paced swiftly into the woods. I didn’t say anything as the dark closed around us. I was pouting, uncomfortable in Jacob’s arms. It felt too intimate to me — surely he didn’t need to hold me quite so tightly — and I couldn’t help but wonder what it felt like to him. It reminded me of my last afternoon in La Push, and I didn’t want to think about that. I folded my arms, annoyed when the brace on my hand intensified the memory.

We didn’t go far; he made a wide arc and came back into the clearing from a different direction, maybe half a football field away from our original departure point. Edward was there alone and Jacob headed toward him.

“You can put me down now.”

“I don’t want to take a chance of messing up the experiment.” His walk slowed and his arms tightened.

“You are so annoying,” I muttered.

“Thanks.”

Out of nowhere, Jasper and Alice stood beside Edward. Jacob took one more step, and then set me down a half dozen feet from Edward. Without looking back at Jacob, I walked to Edward’s side and took his hand.

“Well?” I asked.

“As long as you don’t touch anything, Bella, I can’t imagine someone sticking their nose close enough to

that trail to catch your scent," Jasper said, grimacing. "It was almost completely obscured."

"A definite success," Alice agreed, wrinkling her nose.

"And it gave me an idea."

"Which will work," Alice added confidently.

"Clever," Edward agreed.

"How do you stand that?" Jacob muttered to me.

Edward ignored Jacob and looked at me while he explained. "We're — well, you're — going to leave a false trail to the clearing, Bella. The newborns are hunting, your scent will excite them, and they'll come exactly the way we want them to without being careful about it. Alice can already see that this will work. When they catch our scent, they'll split up and try to come at us from two sides. Half will go through the forest, where her vision suddenly disappears… ."

"Yes!" Jacob hissed.

Edward smiled at him, a smile of true comradeship.

I felt sick. How could they be so eager for this? How could I stand having both of them in danger? I couldn't.

I wouldn't.

"Not a chance," Edward said suddenly, his voice disgusted. It made me jump, worrying that he'd somehow heard my resolve, but his eyes were on Jasper.

"I know, I know," Jasper said quickly. "I didn't even consider it, not really."

Alice stepped on his foot.

"If Bella was actually there in the clearing," Jasper explained to her, "it would drive them insane. They wouldn't be able to concentrate on anything but her. It would make picking them off truly easy... ."

Edward's glare had Jasper backtracking.

"Of course it's too dangerous for her. It was just an errant thought," he said quickly. But he looked at me from the corner of his eyes, and the look was wistful.

"No," Edward said. His voice rang with finality.

"You're right," Jasper said. He took Alice's hand and started back to the others. "Best two out of three?" I heard him ask her as they went to practice again.

Jacob stared after him in disgust.

"Jasper looks at things from a military perspective," Edward quietly defended his brother. "He looks at all the options — it's thoroughness, not callousness."

Jacob snorted.

He'd edged closer unconsciously, drawn by his absorption in the planning. He stood only three feet from Edward now, and, standing there between them, I could feel the physical tension in the air. It was like static, an uncomfortable charge.

Edward got back to business. "I'll bring her here Friday afternoon to lay the false trail. You can meet us afterward, and carry her to a place I know.

Completely out of the way, and easily defensible, not that it will come to that. I'll take another route there."

"And then what? Leave her with a cell phone?" Jacob asked critically.

"You have a better idea?"

Jacob was suddenly smug. "Actually, I do."

"Oh... . Again, dog, not bad at all."

Jacob turned to me quickly, as if determined to play the good guy by keeping me in the conversation. "We tried to talk Seth into staying behind with the younger two. He's still too young, but he's stubborn and he's resisting. So I thought of a new assignment for him — cell phone."

I tried to look like I got it. No one was fooled.

"As long as Seth Clearwater is in his wolf form, he'll be connected to the pack," Edward said. "Distance isn't a problem?" he added, turning to Jacob.

"Nope."

"Three hundred miles?" Edward asked. "That's impressive."

Jacob was the good guy again. "That's the farthest we've ever gone to experiment," he told me. "Still clear as a bell."

I nodded absently; I was reeling from the idea that little Seth Clearwater was already a werewolf, too, and that made it difficult to concentrate. I could see his bright smile, so much like a younger Jacob, in my head; he couldn't be more than fifteen, if he was that.

His enthusiasm at the council meeting bonfire suddenly took on new meaning… .

“It’s a good idea.” Edward seemed reluctant to admit this. “I’ll feel better with Seth there, even without the instantaneous communication. I don’t know if I’d be able to leave Bella there alone. To think it’s come to this, though! Trusting werewolves!”

“Fighting with vampires instead of against them!” Jacob mirrored Edward’s tone of disgust.

“Well, you still get to fight against some of them,” Edward said.

Jacob smiled. “That’s the reason we’re here.”

# Chapter 19

## SELFISH

Edward carried me in his arms, expecting that I wouldn't be able to hang on. I must have fallen asleep on the way.

When I woke up, I was in my bed and the dull light coming through my windows slanted in from a strange angle. Almost like it was afternoon.

I yawned and stretched, my fingers searching for him and coming up empty.

"Edward?" I mumbled.

My seeking fingers encountered something cool and smooth. His hand.

"Are you really awake this time?" he murmured.

"Mmm," I sighed in assent. "Have there been a lot of false alarms?"

"You've been very restless — talking all day."

"All day?" I blinked and looked at the windows again.

"You had a long night," he said reassuringly. "You'd earned a day in bed."

I sat up, and my head spun. The light was coming in my window from the west. "Wow."

"Hungry?" he guessed. "Do you want breakfast in bed?"

"I'll get it," I groaned, stretching again. "I need to get up and move around."

He held my hand on the way to the kitchen, eyeing me carefully, like I might fall over. Or maybe he thought I was sleepwalking.

I kept it simple, throwing a couple of Pop-Tarts in the toaster. I caught a glimpse of myself in the reflective chrome.

"Ugh, I'm a mess."

"It was a long night," he said again. "You should have stayed here and slept."

"Right! And missed everything. You know, you need to start accepting the fact that I'm part of the family now."

He smiled. "I could probably get used to that idea."

I sat down with my breakfast, and he sat next to me. When I lifted the Pop-Tart to take the first bite, I noticed him staring at my hand. I looked down, and saw that I was still wearing the gift that Jacob had given me at the party.

"May I?" he asked, reaching for the tiny wooden wolf.

I swallowed noisily. "Um, sure."

He moved his hand under the charm bracelet and balanced the little figurine in his snowy palm. For a fleeting moment, I was afraid. Just the slightest twist of his fingers could crush it into splinters.

But of course Edward wouldn't do that. I was embarrassed I'd even had the thought. He only

weighed the wolf in his palm for a moment, and then let it fall. It swung lightly from my wrist.

I tried to read the expression in his eyes. All I could see was thoughtfulness; he kept everything else hidden, if there was anything else.

“Jacob Black can give you presents.”

It wasn’t a question, or an accusation. Just a statement of fact. But I knew he was referring to my last birthday and the fit I’d thrown over gifts; I hadn’t wanted any. Especially not from Edward. It wasn’t entirely logical, and, of course, everyone had ignored me anyway… .

“You’ve given me presents,” I reminded him. “You know I like the homemade kind.”

He pursed his lips for a second. “How about hand-me-downs? Are those acceptable?”

“What do you mean?”

“This bracelet.” His finger traced a circle around my wrist. “You’ll be wearing this a lot?”

I shrugged.

“Because you wouldn’t want to hurt his feelings,” he suggested shrewdly.

“Sure, I guess so.”

“Don’t you think it’s fair, then,” he asked, looking down at my hand as he spoke. He turned it palm up, and ran his finger along the veins in my wrist. “If I have a little representation?”

“Representation?”

“A charm — something to keep me on your mind.”

“You’re in every thought I have. I don’t need reminders.”

“If I gave you something, would you wear it?” he pressed.

“A hand-me-down?” I checked.

“Yes, something I’ve had for a while.” He smiled his angel’s smile.

If this was the only reaction to Jacob’s gift, I would take it gladly. “Whatever makes you happy.”

“Have you noticed the inequality?” he asked, and his voice turned accusing. “Because I certainly have.”

“What inequality?”

His eyes narrowed. “Everyone else is able to get away with giving you things. Everyone but me. I would have loved to get you a graduation present, but I didn’t. I knew it would have upset you more than if anyone else did. That’s utterly unfair. How do you explain yourself?”

“Easy.” I shrugged. “You’re more important than everyone else. And you’ve given me you. That’s already more than I deserve, and anything else you give me just throws us more out of balance.”

He processed that for a moment, and then rolled his eyes. “The way you regard me is ludicrous.”

I chewed my breakfast calmly. I knew he wouldn't listen if I told him that he had that backward.

Edward's phone buzzed.

He looked at the number before he opened it. "What is it, Alice?"

He listened, and I waited for his reaction, suddenly nervous. But whatever she said didn't surprise him. He sighed a few times.

"I sort of guessed as much," he told her, staring into my eyes, a disapproving arch to his brow. "She was talking in her sleep."

I flushed. What had I said now?

"I'll take care of it," he promised.

He glared at me as he shut his phone. "Is there something you'd like to talk to me about?"

I deliberated for a moment. Given Alice's warning last night, I could guess why she'd called. And then remembering the troubled dreams I'd had as I'd slept through the day — dreams where I chased after Jasper, trying to follow him and find the clearing in the maze-like woods, knowing I would find Edward there ... Edward, and the monsters who wanted to kill me, but not caring about them because I'd already made my decision — I could also guess what Edward had overheard while I'd slept.

I pursed my lips for a moment, not quite able to meet his gaze. He waited.

"I like Jasper's idea," I finally said.

He groaned.

“I want to help. I have to do something,” I insisted.

“It wouldn’t help to have you in danger.”

“Jasper thinks it would. This is his area of expertise.”

Edward glowered at me.

“You can’t keep me away,” I threatened. “I’m not going to hide out in the forest while you all take risks for me.”

Suddenly, he was fighting a smile. “Alice doesn’t see you in the clearing, Bella. She sees you stumbling around lost in the woods. You won’t be able to find us; you’ll just make it more time consuming for me to find you afterward.”

I tried to keep as cool as he was. “That’s because Alice didn’t factor in Seth Clearwater,” I said politely. “If she had, of course, she wouldn’t have been able to see anything at all. But it sounds like Seth wants to be there as much as I do. It shouldn’t be too hard to persuade him to show me the way.”

Anger flickered across his face, and then he took a deep breath and composed himself. “That might have worked … if you hadn’t told me. Now I’ll just ask Sam to give Seth certain orders. Much as he might want to, Seth won’t be able to ignore that kind of injunction.”

I kept my smile pleasant. “But why would Sam give those orders? If I tell him how it would help for me to be there? I’ll bet Sam would rather do me a favor than you.”

He had to compose himself again. “Maybe you’re right. But I’m sure Jacob would be only too eager to give those same orders.”

I frowned. “Jacob?”

“Jacob is second in command. Did he never tell you that? His orders have to be followed, too.”

He had me, and by his smile, he knew it. My forehead crumpled. Jacob would be on his side — in this one instance — I was sure. And Jacob never had told me that.

Edward took advantage of the fact that I was momentarily stumped, continuing in a suspiciously smooth and soothing voice.

“I got a fascinating look into the pack’s mind last night. It was better than a soap opera. I had no idea how complex the dynamic is with such a large pack. The pull of the individual against the plural psyche … Absolutely fascinating.”

He was obviously trying to distract me. I glared at him.

“Jacob’s been keeping a lot of secrets,” he said with a grin.

I didn’t answer, I just kept glaring, holding on to my argument and waiting for an opening.

“For instance, did you note the smaller gray wolf there last night?”

I nodded one stiff nod.

He chuckled. “They take all of their legends so seriously. It turns out there are things that none of their stories prepared them for.”

I sighed. “Okay, I’ll bite. What are you talking about?”

“They always accepted without question that it was only the direct grandsons of the original wolf who had the power to transform.”

“So someone changed who wasn’t a direct descendant?”

“No. She’s a direct descendant, all right.”

I blinked, and my eyes widened. “She?”

He nodded. “She knows you. Her name is Leah Clearwater.”

“Leah’s a werewolf!” I shrieked. “What? For how long? Why didn’t Jacob tell me?”

“There are things he wasn’t allowed to share — their numbers, for instance. Like I said before, when Sam gives an order, the pack simply isn’t able to ignore it. Jacob was very careful to think of other things when he was near me. Of course, after last night that’s all out the window.”

“I can’t believe it. Leah Clearwater!” Suddenly, I remembered Jacob speaking of Leah and Sam, and the way he acted as if he’d said too much — after he’d said something about Sam having to look in Leah’s eyes every day and know that he’d broken all his promises… . Leah on the cliff, a tear glistening on her cheek when Old Quil had spoken of the burden and sacrifice the Quileute sons shared… . And Billy, spending time with Sue because she was having

trouble with her kids … and here the trouble actually was that both of them were werewolves now!

I hadn't given much thought to Leah Clearwater, just to grieve for her loss when Harry had passed away, and then to pity her again when Jacob had told her story, about how the strange imprinting between Sam and her cousin Emily had broken Leah's heart.

And now she was part of Sam's pack, hearing his thoughts … and unable to hide her own.

I really hate that part, Jacob had said. Everything you're ashamed of, laid out for everyone to see.

"Poor Leah," I whispered.

Edward snorted. "She's making life exceedingly unpleasant for the rest of them. I'm not sure she deserves your sympathy."

"What do you mean?"

"It's hard enough for them, having to share all their thoughts. Most of them try to cooperate, make it easier. When even one member is deliberately malicious, it's painful for everyone."

"She has reason enough," I mumbled, still on her side.

"Oh, I know," he said. "The imprinting compulsion is one of the strangest things I've ever witnessed in my life, and I've seen some strange things." He shook his head wonderingly. "The way Sam is tied to his Emily is impossible to describe — or I should say her Sam. Sam really had no choice. It reminds me of A Midsummer Night's Dream with all the chaos caused

by the fairies' love spells ... like magic." He smiled. "It's very nearly as strong as the way I feel about you."

"Poor Leah," I said again. "But what do you mean, malicious?"

"She's constantly bringing up things they'd rather not think of," he explained. "For example, Embry."

"What's with Embry?" I asked, surprised.

"His mother moved down from the Makah reservation seventeen years ago, when she was pregnant with him. She's not Quileute. Everyone assumed she'd left his father behind with the Makahs. But then he joined the pack."

"So?"

"So the prime candidates for his father are Quil Ateara Sr., Joshua Uley, or Billy Black, all of them married at that point, of course."

"No!" I gasped. Edward was right — this was exactly like a soap opera.

"Now Sam, Jacob, and Quil all wonder which of them has a half-brother. They'd all like to think it's Sam, since his father was never much of a father. But the doubt is always there. Jacob's never been able to ask Billy about that."

"Wow. How did you get so much in one night?"

"The pack mind is mesmerizing. All thinking together and then separately at the same time. There's so much to read!"

He sounded faintly regretful, like someone who'd had to put down a good book just before the climax. I laughed.

"The pack is fascinating," I agreed. "Almost as fascinating as you are when you're trying to distract me."

His expression became polite again — a perfect poker face.

"I have to be in that clearing, Edward."

"No," he said in a very final tone.

A certain path occurred to me at that moment.

It wasn't so much that I had to be in the clearing. I just had to be where Edward was.

Cruel, I accused myself. Selfish, selfish, selfish! Don't do it!

I ignored my better instincts. I couldn't look at him while I spoke, though. The guilt had my eyes glued to the table.

"Okay, look, Edward," I whispered. "Here's the thing … I've already gone crazy once. I know what my limits are. And I can't stand it if you leave me again."

I didn't look up to see his reaction, afraid to know how much pain I was inflicting. I did hear his sudden intake of breath and the silence that followed. I stared at the dark wooden tabletop, wishing I could take the words back. But knowing I probably wouldn't. Not if it worked.

Suddenly, his arms were around me, his hands stroking my face, my arms. He was comforting me. The guilt went into spiral mode. But the survival instinct was stronger. There was no question that he was fundamental to my survival.

“You know it’s not like that, Bella,” he murmured. “I won’t be far, and it will be over quickly.”

“I can’t stand it,” I insisted, still staring down. “Not knowing whether or not you’ll come back. How do I live through that, no matter how quickly it’s over?”

He sighed. “It’s going to be easy, Bella. There’s no reason for your fears.”

“None at all?”

“None.”

“And everybody will be fine?”

“Everyone,” he promised.

“So there’s no way at all that I need to be in the clearing?”

“Of course not. Alice just told me that they’re down to nineteen. We’ll be able to handle it easily.”

“That’s right — you said it was so easy that someone could sit out,” I repeated his words from last night. “Did you really mean that?”

“Yes.”

It felt too simple — he had to see it coming.

“So easy that you could sit out?”

After a long moment of silence, I finally looked up at his expression.

The poker face was back.

I took a deep breath. "So it's one way or the other. Either there is more danger than you want me to know about, in which case it would be right for me to be there, to do what I can to help. Or … it's going to be so easy that they'll get by without you. Which way is it?"

He didn't speak.

I knew what he was thinking of — the same thing I was thinking of. Carlisle. Esme. Emmett. Rosalie. Jasper. And … I forced myself to think the last name. And Alice.

I wondered if I was a monster. Not the kind that he thought he was, but the real kind. The kind that hurt people. The kind that had no limits when it came to what they wanted.

What I wanted was to keep him safe, safe with me. Did I have a limit to what I would do, what I would sacrifice for that? I wasn't sure.

"You ask me to let them fight without my help?" he said in a quiet voice.

"Yes." I was surprised I could keep my voice even, I felt so wretched inside. "Or to let me be there. Either way, so long as we're together."

He took a deep breath, and then exhaled slowly. He moved his hands to place them on either side of my face, forcing me to meet his gaze. He looked into my eyes for a long time. I wondered what he was looking

for, and what it was that he found. Was the guilt as thick on my face as it was in my stomach — sickening me?

His eyes tightened against some emotion I couldn't read, and he dropped one hand to pull out his phone again.

"Alice," he sighed. "Could you come babysit Bella for a bit?" He raised one eyebrow, daring me to object to the word. "I need to speak with Jasper."

She evidently agreed. He put the phone away and went back to staring at my face.

"What are you going to say to Jasper?" I whispered.

"I'm going to discuss … me sitting out."

It was easy to read in his face how difficult the words were for him.

"I'm sorry."

I was sorry. I hated to make him do this. Not enough that I could fake a smile and tell him to go on ahead without me. Definitely not that much.

"Don't apologize," he said, smiling just a little. "Never be afraid to tell me how you feel, Bella. If this is what you need …" He shrugged. "You are my first priority."

"I didn't mean it that way — like you have to choose me over your family."

"I know that. Besides, that's not what you asked. You gave me two alternatives that you could live with, and I chose the one that I could live with. That's how compromise is supposed to work."

I leaned forward and rested my forehead against his chest. "Thank you," I whispered.

"Anytime," he answered, kissing my hair. "Anything."

We didn't move for a long moment. I kept my face hidden, pressed against his shirt. Two voices struggled inside me. One that wanted to be good and brave, and one that told the good one to keep her mouth shut.

"Who's the third wife?" he asked me suddenly.

"Huh?" I said, stalling. I didn't remember having had that dream again.

"You were mumbling something about 'the third wife' last night. The rest made a little sense, but you lost me there."

"Oh. Um, yeah. That was just one of the stories that I heard at the bonfire the other night." I shrugged. "I guess it stuck with me."

Edward leaned away from me and cocked his head to the side, probably confused by the uncomfortable edge to my voice.

Before he could ask, Alice appeared in the kitchen doorway with a sour expression.

"You're going to miss all the fun," she grumbled.

"Hello, Alice," he greeted her. He put one finger under my chin and tilted my face up to kiss me goodbye.

"I'll be back later tonight," he promised me. "I'll go work this out with the others, rearrange things."

"Okay."

"There's not much to arrange," Alice said. "I already told them. Emmett is pleased."

Edward sighed. "Of course he is."

He walked out the door, leaving me to face Alice.

She glared at me.

"I'm sorry," I apologized again. "Do you think this will make it more dangerous for you?"

She snorted. "You worry too much, Bella. You're going to go prematurely gray."

"Why are you upset, then?"

"Edward is such a grouch when he doesn't get his way. I'm just anticipating living with him for the next few months." She made a face. "I suppose, if it keeps you sane, it's worth it. But I wish you could control the pessimism, Bella. It's so unnecessary."

"Would you let Jasper go without you?" I demanded.

Alice grimaced. "That's different."

"Sure it is."

"Go clean yourself up," she ordered me. "Charlie will be home in fifteen minutes, and if you look this ragged he's not going to want to let you out again."

Wow, I'd really lost the whole day. It felt like such a waste. I was glad I wouldn't always have to squander my time with sleeping.

I was entirely presentable when Charlie got home — fully dressed, hair decent, and in the kitchen putting his dinner on the table. Alice sat in Edward's usual place, and this seemed to make Charlie's day.

"Howdy, Alice! How are you, hon?"

"I'm fine, Charlie, thanks."

"I see you finally made it out of bed, sleepyhead," he said to me as I sat beside him, before turning back to Alice. "Everyone's talking about that party your parents threw last night. I'll bet you've got one heck of a clean-up job ahead of you."

Alice shrugged. Knowing her, it was already done.

"It was worth it," she said. "It was a great party."

"Where's Edward?" Charlie asked, a little grudgingly. "Is he helping clean up?"

Alice sighed and her face turned tragic. It was probably an act, but it was too perfect for me to be positive. "No. He's off planning the weekend with Emmett and Carlisle."

"Hiking again?"

Alice nodded, her face suddenly forlorn. "Yes. They're all going, except me. We always go backpacking at the end of the school year, sort of a celebration, but this year I decided I'd rather shop than hike, and not one of them will stay behind with me. I'm abandoned."

Her face puckered, the expression so devastated that Charlie leaned toward her automatically, one hand reaching out, looking for some way to help. I glared at her suspiciously. What was she doing?

“Alice, honey, why don’t you come stay with us,” Charlie offered. “I hate to think of you all alone in that big house.”

She sighed. Something squashed my foot under the table.

“Ow!” I protested.

Charlie turned to me. “What?”

Alice shot me a frustrated look. I could tell she thought that I was very slow tonight.

“Stubbed my toe,” I muttered.

“Oh.” He looked back at Alice. “So, how ’bout it?”

She stepped on my foot again, not quite so hard this time.

“Er, Dad, you know, we don’t really have the best accommodations here. I bet Alice doesn’t want to sleep on my floor… .”

Charlie pursed his lips. Alice pulled out the devastated expression again.

“Maybe Bella should stay up there with you,” he suggested. “Just until your folks get back.”

“Oh, would you, Bella?” Alice smiled at me radiantly. “You don’t mind shopping with me, right?”

“Sure,” I agreed. “Shopping. Okay.”

“When are they leaving?” Charlie asked.

Alice made another face. “Tomorrow.”

“When do you want me?” I asked.

“After dinner, I guess,” she said, and then put one finger to her chin, thoughtful. “You don’t have anything going on Saturday, do you? I want to get out of town to shop, and it will be an all-day thing.”

“Not Seattle,” Charlie interjected, his eyebrows pulling together.

“Of course not,” Alice agreed at once, though we both knew Seattle would be plenty safe on Saturday. “I was thinking Olympia, maybe… .”

“You’ll like that, Bella.” Charlie was cheerful with relief. “Go get your fill of the city.”

“Yeah, Dad. It’ll be great.”

With one easy conversation, Alice had cleared my schedule for the battle.

Edward returned not much later. He accepted Charlie’s wishes for a nice trip without surprise. He claimed they were leaving early in the morning, and said goodnight before the usual time. Alice left with him.

I excused myself soon after they left.

“You can’t be tired,” Charlie protested.

“A little,” I lied.

“No wonder you like to skip the parties,” he muttered. “It takes you so long to recover.”

Upstairs, Edward was lying across my bed.

"What time are we meeting with the wolves?" I murmured as I went to join him.

"In an hour."

"That's good. Jake and his friends need to get some sleep."

"They don't need as much as you do," he pointed out.

I moved to another topic, assuming he was about to try to talk me into staying home. "Did Alice tell you that she's kidnapping me again?"

He grinned. "Actually, she's not."

I stared at him, confused, and he laughed quietly at my expression.

"I'm the only one who has permission to hold you hostage, remember?" he said. "Alice is going hunting with the rest of them." He sighed. "I guess I don't need to do that now."

"You're kidnapping me?"

He nodded.

I thought about that briefly. No Charlie listening downstairs, checking on me every so often. And no houseful of wide-awake vampires with their intrusively sensitive hearing… . Just him and me — really alone.

"Is that all right?" he asked, concerned by my silence.

"Well … sure, except for one thing."

“What thing?” His eyes were anxious. It was mind-boggling, but, somehow, he still seemed unsure of his hold on me. Maybe I needed to make myself more clear.

“Why didn’t Alice tell Charlie you were leaving tonight?” I asked.

He laughed, relieved.

I enjoyed the trip to the clearing more than I had last night. I still felt guilty, still afraid, but I wasn’t terrified anymore. I could function. I could see past what was coming, and almost believe that maybe it would be okay. Edward was apparently fine with the idea of missing the fight … and that made it very hard not to believe him when he said this would be easy. He wouldn’t leave his family if he didn’t believe it himself. Maybe Alice was right, and I did worry too much.

We got to the clearing last.

Jasper and Emmett were already wrestling — just warming up from the sounds of their laughter. Alice and Rosalie lounged on the hard ground, watching. Esme and Carlisle were talking a few yards away, heads close together, fingers linked, not paying attention.

It was much brighter tonight, the moon shining through the thin clouds, and I could easily see the three wolves that sat around the edge of the practice ring, spaced far apart to watch from different angles.

It was also easy to recognize Jacob; I would have known him at once, even if he hadn’t looked up and stared at the sound of our approach.

“Where are the rest of the wolves?” I wondered.

“They don’t all need to be here. One would do the job, but Sam didn’t trust us enough to just send Jacob, though Jacob was willing. Quil and Embry are his usual … I guess you could call them his wingmen.”

“Jacob trusts you.”

Edward nodded. “He trusts us not to try to kill him. That’s about it, though.”

“Are you participating tonight?” I asked, hesitant. I knew this was going to be almost as hard for him as being left behind would have been for me. Maybe harder.

“I’ll help Jasper when he needs it. He wants to try some unequal groupings, teach them how to deal with multiple attackers.”

He shrugged.

And a fresh wave of panic shattered my brief sense of confidence.

They were still outnumbered. I was making that worse.

I stared at the field, trying to hide my reaction.

It was the wrong place to look, struggling as I was to lie to myself, to convince myself that everything would work out as I needed it to. Because when I forced my eyes away from the Cullens — away from the image of their play fighting that would be real and deadly in just a few days — Jacob caught my eyes and smiled.

It was the same wolfy grin as before, his eyes scrunching the way they did when he was human.

It was hard to believe that, not so long ago, I'd found the werewolves frightening — lost sleep to nightmares about them.

I knew, without asking, which of the others was Embry and which was Quil. Because Embry was clearly the thinner gray wolf with the dark spots on his back, who sat so patiently watching, while Quil — deep chocolate brown, lighter over his face — twitched constantly, looking like he was dying to join in the mock fight. They weren't monsters, even like this. They were friends.

Friends who didn't look nearly as indestructible as Emmett and Jasper did, moving faster than cobra strikes while the moonlight glinted off their granite-hard skin. Friends who didn't seem to understand the danger involved here. Friends who were still somewhat mortal, friends who could bleed, friends who could die… .

Edward's confidence was reassuring, because it was plain that he wasn't truly worried about his family. But would it hurt him if something happened to the wolves? Was there any reason for him to be anxious, if that possibility didn't bother him? Edward's confidence only applied to one set of my fears.

I tried to smile back at Jacob, swallowing against the lump in my throat. I didn't seem to get it right.

Jacob sprang lightly to his feet, his agility at odds with his sheer mass, and trotted over to where Edward and I stood on the fringe of things.

"Jacob," Edward greeted him politely.

Jacob ignored him, his dark eyes on me. He put his head down to my level, as he had yesterday, cocking it to one side. A low whimper escaped his muzzle.

"I'm fine," I answered, not needing the translation that Edward was about to give. "Just worried, you know."

Jacob continued to stare at me.

"He wants to know why," Edward murmured.

Jacob growled — not a threatening sound, an annoyed sound — and Edward's lips twitched.

"What?" I asked.

"He thinks my translations leave something to be desired. What he actually thought was, 'That's really stupid. What is there to be worried about?' I edited, because I thought it was rude."

I halfway smiled, too anxious to really feel amused. "There's plenty to be worried about," I told Jacob. "Like a bunch of really stupid wolves getting themselves hurt."

Jacob laughed his coughing bark.

Edward sighed. "Jasper wants help. You'll be okay without a translator?"

"I'll manage."

Edward looked at me wistfully for one minute, his expression hard to understand, then turned his back and strode over to where Jasper waited.

I sat down where I was. The ground was cold and uncomfortable.

Jacob took a step forward, then looked back at me, and a low whine rose in his throat. He took another half-step.

“Go on without me,” I told him. “I don’t want to watch.”

Jacob leaned his head to the side again for a moment, and then folded himself on to the ground beside me with a rumbling sigh.

“Really, you can go ahead,” I assured him. He didn’t respond, he just put his head down on his paws.

I stared up at the bright silver clouds, not wanting to see the fight. My imagination had more than enough fuel. A breeze blew through the clearing, and I shivered.

Jacob scooted himself closer to me, pressing his warm fur against my left side.

“Er, thanks,” I muttered.

After a few minutes, I leaned against his wide shoulder. It was much more comfortable that way.

The clouds moved slowly across the sky, dimming and brightening as thick patches crossed the moon and passed on.

Absently, I began pulling my fingers through the fur on his neck. That same strange humming sound that he’d made yesterday rumbled in his throat. It was a homey kind of sound. Rougher, wilder than a cat’s purr, but conveying the same sense of contentment.

"You know, I never had a dog," I mused. "I always wanted one, but Renée's allergic."

Jacob laughed; his body shook under me.

"Aren't you worried about Saturday at all?" I asked.

He turned his enormous head toward me, so that I could see one of his eyes roll.

"I wish I could feel that positive."

He leaned his head against my leg and started humming again. And it did make me feel just a little bit better.

"So we've got some hiking to do tomorrow, I guess."

He rumbled; the sound was enthusiastic.

"It might be a long hike," I warned him. "Edward doesn't judge distances the way a normal person does."

Jacob barked another laugh.

I settled deeper into his warm fur, resting my head against his neck.

It was strange. Even though he was in this bizarre form, this felt more like the way Jake and I used to be — the easy, effortless friendship that was as natural as breathing in and out — than the last few times I'd been with Jacob while he was human. Odd that I should find that again here, when I'd thought this wolf thing was the cause of its loss.

The killing games continued in the clearing, and I stared at the hazy moon.

# Chapter 20

## COMPROMISE

Everything was ready.

I was packed for my two-day visit with "Alice," and my bag waited for me on the passenger seat of my truck. I'd given the concert tickets to Angela, Ben, and Mike. Mike was going to take Jessica, which was exactly as I'd hoped. Billy had borrowed Old Quil Ateara's boat and invited Charlie down for some open sea fishing before the afternoon game started. Collin and Brady, the two youngest werewolves, were staying behind to protect La Push — though they were just children, both of them only thirteen. Still, Charlie would be safer than anyone left in Forks.

I had done all that I could do. I tried to accept that, and put the things that were outside of my control out of my head, for tonight at least. One way or another, this would all be over in forty-eight hours. The thought was almost comforting.

Edward had requested that I relax, and I was going to do my best.

"For this one night, could we try to forget everything besides just you and me?" he'd pleaded, unleashing the full force of his eyes on me. "It seems like I can never get enough time like that. I need to be with you. Just you."

That was not a hard request to agree to, though I knew that forgetting my fears would be much easier said than done. Other matters were on my mind now,

knowing that we had this night to be alone, and that would help.

There were some things that had changed.

For instance, I was ready.

I was ready to join his family and his world. The fear and guilt and anguish I was feeling now had taught me that much. I'd had a chance to concentrate on this — as I'd gazed at the moon through the clouds and rested against a werewolf — and I knew I would not panic again. The next time something came at us, I would be ready. An asset, not a liability. He would never have to make the choice between me and his family again. We would be partners, like Alice and Jasper. Next time, I would do my part.

I would wait for the sword to be removed from over my head, so that Edward would be satisfied. But it wasn't necessary. I was ready.

There was only one missing piece.

One piece, because there were some things that had not changed, and that included the desperate way I loved him. I'd had plenty of time to think through the ramifications of Jasper and Emmett's bet — to figure out the things I was willing to lose with my humanity, and the part that I was not willing to give up. I knew which human experience I was going to insist on before I became inhuman.

So we had some things to work out tonight. After everything I'd seen in the past two years, I didn't believe in the word impossible anymore. It was going to take more than that to stop me now.

Okay, well, honestly, it was probably going to be much more complicated than that. But I was going to try.

As decided as I was, I wasn't surprised that I still felt nervous as I drove down the long path to his house — I didn't know how to do what I was trying to do, and that guaranteed me some serious jitters. He sat in the passenger seat, fighting a smile at my slow pace. I was surprised that he hadn't insisted on taking the wheel, but tonight he seemed content to go at my speed.

It was after dark when we reached the house. In spite of that, the meadow was bright in the light shining from every window.

As soon as I cut the engine he was at my door, opening it for me. He lifted me from the cab with one arm, slinging my bag out of the truck bed and over his shoulder with the other. His lips found mine as I heard him kick the truck's door shut behind me.

Without breaking the kiss, he swung me up so that I was cradled in his arms and carried me into the house.

Was the front door already open? I didn't know. We were inside, though, and I was dizzy. I had to remind myself to breathe.

This kissing did not frighten me. It wasn't like before when I could feel the fear and panic leaking through his control. His lips were not anxious, but enthusiastic now — he seemed as thrilled as I was that we had tonight to concentrate on being together. He continued to kiss me for several minutes, standing there in the entry; he seemed less guarded than usual, his mouth cold and urgent on mine.

I began to feel cautiously optimistic. Perhaps getting what I wanted would not be as difficult as I'd expected it to be.

No, of course it was going to be just exactly that difficult.

With a low chuckle, he pulled me away, holding me at arm's length.

"Welcome home," he said, his eyes liquid and warm.

"That sounds nice," I said, breathless.

He set me gently on my feet. I wrapped both my arms around him, refusing to allow any space between us.

"I have something for you," he said, his tone conversational.

"Oh?"

"Your hand-me-down, remember? You said that was allowable."

"Oh, that's right. I guess I did say that."

He chuckled at my reluctance.

"It's up in my room. Shall I go get it?"

His bedroom? "Sure," I agreed, feeling quite devious as I wound my fingers through his. "Let's go."

He must have been eager to give me my non-present, because human velocity was not fast enough for him. He scooped me up again and nearly flew up the stairs to his room. He set me down at the door, and darted into his closet.

He was back before I'd taken a step, but I ignored him and went to the huge gold bed, plopping down on the edge and then sliding to the center. I curled up in a ball, my arms wrapped around my knees.

"Okay," I grumbled. Now that I was where I wanted to be, I could afford a little reluctance. "Let me have it."

Edward laughed.

He climbed onto the bed to sit next to me, and my heart thumped unevenly. Hopefully he would write that off as some reaction to him giving me presents.

"A hand-me-down," he reminded me sternly. He pulled my left wrist away from my leg, and touched the silver bracelet for just a moment. Then he gave me my arm back.

I examined it cautiously. On the opposite side of the chain from the wolf, there now hung a brilliant heart-shaped crystal. It was cut in a million facets, so that even in the subdued light shining from the lamp, it sparkled. I inhaled in a low gasp.

"It was my mother's." He shrugged deprecatingly. "I inherited quite a few baubles like this. I've given some to Esme and Alice both. So, clearly, this is not a big deal in any way."

I smiled ruefully at his assurance.

"But I thought it was a good representation," he continued. "It's hard and cold." He laughed. "And it throws rainbows in the sunlight."

"You forgot the most important similarity," I murmured. "It's beautiful."

"My heart is just as silent," he mused. "And it, too, is yours."

I twisted my wrist so the heart would glimmer. "Thank you. For both."

"No, thank you. It's a relief to have you accept a gift so easily. Good practice for you, too." He grinned, flashing his teeth.

I leaned into him, ducking my head under his arm and cuddling into his side. It probably felt similar to snuggling with Michelangelo's David, except that this perfect marble creature wrapped his arms around me to pull me closer.

It seemed like a good place to start.

"Can we discuss something? I'd appreciate it if you could begin by being open-minded."

He hesitated for a moment. "I'll give it my best effort," he agreed, cautious now.

"I'm not breaking any rules here," I promised. "This is strictly about you and me." I cleared my throat. "So ... I was impressed by how well we were able to compromise the other night. I was thinking I would like to apply the same principle to a different situation." I wondered why I was being so formal. Must be the nerves.

"What would you like to negotiate?" he asked, a smile in his voice.

I struggled, trying to find exactly the right words to open with.

"Listen to your heart fly," he murmured. "It's fluttering like a hummingbird's wings. Are you all right?"

"I'm great."

"Please go on then," he encouraged.

"Well, I guess, first, I wanted to talk to you about that whole ridiculous marriage condition thing."

"It's only ridiculous to you. What about it?"

"I was wondering ... is that open to negotiation?"

Edward frowned, serious now. "I've already made the largest concession by far and away — I've agreed to take your life away against my better judgment. And that ought to entitle me to a few compromises on your part."

"No." I shook my head, focusing on keeping my face composed. "That part's a done deal. We're not discussing my ... renovations right now. I want to hammer out some other details."

He looked at me suspiciously. "Which details do you mean exactly?"

I hesitated. "Let's clarify your prerequisites first."

"You know what I want."

"Matrimony." I made it sound like a dirty word.

"Yes." He smiled a wide smile. "To start with."

The shock spoiled my carefully composed expression. "There's more?"

"Well," he said, and his face was calculating. "If you're my wife, then what's mine is yours … like tuition money. So there would be no problem with Dartmouth."

"Anything else? While you're already being absurd?"

"I wouldn't mind some time."

"No. No time. That's a deal breaker right there."

He sighed longingly. "Just a year or two?"

I shook my head, my lips set in a stubborn frown. "Move along to the next one."

"That's it. Unless you'd like to talk cars …"

He grinned widely when I grimaced, then took my hand and began playing with my fingers.

"I didn't realize there was anything else you wanted besides being transformed into a monster yourself. I'm extremely curious." His voice was low and soft. The slight edge would have been hard to detect if I hadn't known it so well.

I paused, staring at his hand on mine. I still didn't know how to begin. I felt his eyes watching me and I was afraid to look up. The blood began to burn in my face.

His cool fingers brushed my cheek. "You're blushing?" he asked in surprise. I kept my eyes down. "Please, Bella, the suspense is painful."

I bit my lip.

"Bella." His tone reproached me now, reminded me that it was hard for him when I kept my thoughts to myself.

"Well, I'm a little worried … about after," I admitted, finally looking at him.

I felt his body tense, but his voice was gentle and velvet. "What has you worried?"

"All of you just seem so convinced that the only thing I'm going to be interested in, afterward, is slaughtering everyone in town," I confessed, while he winced at my choice of words. "And I'm afraid I'll be so preoccupied with the mayhem that I won't be me anymore … and that I won't … I won't want you the same way I do now."

"Bella, that part doesn't last forever," he assured me.

He was missing the point.

"Edward," I said, nervous, staring at a freckle on my wrist. "There's something that I want to do before I'm not human anymore."

He waited for me to continue. I didn't. My face was all hot.

"Whatever you want," he encouraged, anxious and completely clueless.

"Do you promise?" I muttered, knowing my attempt to trap him with his words was not going to work, but unable to resist.

"Yes," he said. I looked up to see that his eyes were earnest and confused. "Tell me what you want, and you can have it."

I couldn't believe how awkward and idiotic I felt. I was too innocent — which was, of course, central to the discussion. I didn't have the faintest idea how to be seductive. I would just have to settle for flushed and self-conscious.

"You," I mumbled almost incoherently.

"I'm yours." He smiled, still oblivious, trying to hold my gaze as I looked away again.

I took a deep breath and shifted forward so that I was kneeling on the bed. Then I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him.

He kissed me back, bewildered but willing. His lips were gentle against mine, and I could tell his mind was elsewhere — trying to figure out what was on my mind. I decided he needed a hint.

My hands were slightly shaky as I unlocked my arms from around his neck. My fingers slid down his neck to the collar of his shirt. The trembling didn't help as I tried to hurry to undo the buttons before he stopped me.

His lips froze, and I could almost hear the click in his head as he put together my words and my actions.

He pushed me away at once, his face heavily disapproving.

"Be reasonable, Bella."

"You promised — whatever I wanted," I reminded him without hope.

“We’re not having this discussion.” He glared at me while he refastened the two buttons I’d managed to open.

My teeth clamped together.

“I say we are,” I growled. I moved my hands to my blouse and yanked open the top button.

He grabbed my wrists and pinned them to my sides.

“I say we’re not,” he said flatly.

We glowered at each other.

“You wanted to know,” I pointed out.

“I thought it would be something faintly realistic.”

“So you can ask for any stupid, ridiculous thing you want — like getting married — but I’m not allowed to even discuss what I —”

While I was ranting, he pulled my hands together to restrain them in just one of his, and put his other hand over my mouth.

“No.” His face was hard.

I took a deep breath to steady myself. And, as the anger began to fade, I felt something else.

It took me a minute to recognize why I was staring down again, the blush returning — why my stomach felt uneasy, why there was too much moisture in my eyes, why I suddenly wanted to run from the room.

Rejection washed through me, instinctive and strong.

I knew it was irrational. He'd been very clear on other occasions that my safety was the only factor. Yet I'd never made myself quite so vulnerable before. I scowled at the golden comforter that matched his eyes and tried to banish the reflex reaction that told me I was unwanted and unwantable.

Edward sighed. The hand over my mouth moved under my chin, and he pulled my face up until I had to look at him.

"What now?"

"Nothing," I mumbled.

He scrutinized my face for long moment while I tried unsuccessfully to twist away from his gaze. His brow furrowed, and his expression became horrified.

"Did I hurt your feelings?" he asked, shocked.

"No," I lied.

So quickly that I wasn't even sure how it happened, I was in his arms, my face cradled between his shoulder and his hand, while his thumb stroked reassuringly against my cheek.

"You know why I have to say no," he murmured. "You know that I want you, too."

"Do you?" I whispered, my voice full of doubt.

"Of course I do, you silly, beautiful, oversensitive girl." He laughed once, and then his voice was bleak. "Doesn't everyone? I feel like there's a line behind me, jockeying for position, waiting for me to make a big enough mistake... . You're too desirable for your own good."

"Who's being silly now?" I doubted if awkward, self-conscious, and inept added up to desirable in anyone's book.

"Do I have to send a petition around to get you to believe? Shall I tell you whose names would be on the top of the list? You know a few of them, but some might surprise you."

I shook my head against his chest, grimacing. "You're just trying to distract me. Let's get back to the subject."

He sighed.

"Tell me if I have anything wrong." I tried to sound detached. "Your demands are marriage" — I couldn't say the word without making a face — "paying my tuition, more time, and you wouldn't mind if my vehicle went a little faster." I raised my eyebrows. "Did I get everything? That's a hefty list."

"Only the first is a demand." He seemed to be having a hard time keeping a straight face. "The others are merely requests."

"And my lone, solitary little demand is —"

"Demand?" he interrupted, suddenly serious again.

"Yes, demand."

His eyes narrowed.

"Getting married is a stretch for me. I'm not giving in unless I get something in return."

He leaned down to whisper in my ear. “No,” he murmured silkily. “It’s not possible now. Later, when you’re less breakable. Be patient, Bella.”

I tried to keep my voice firm and reasonable. “But that’s the problem. It won’t be the same when I’m less breakable. I won’t be the same! I don’t know who I’ll be then.”

“You’ll still be Bella,” he promised.

I frowned. “If I’m so far gone that I’d want to kill Charlie — that I’d drink Jacob’s blood or Angela’s if I got the chance — how can that be true?”

“It will pass. And I doubt you’ll want to drink the dog’s blood.” He pretended to shudder at the thought. “Even as a newborn, you’ll have better taste than that.”

I ignored his attempt to sidetrack me. “But that will always be what I want most, won’t it?” I challenged. “Blood, blood, and more blood!”

“The fact that you are still alive is proof that that is not true,” he pointed out.

“Over eighty years later,” I reminded him. “What I meant was physically, though. Intellectually, I know I’ll be able to be myself ... after a while. But just purely physically — I will always be thirsty, more than anything else.”

He didn’t answer.

“So I will be different,” I concluded unopposed. “Because right now, physically, there’s nothing I want more than you. More than food or water or oxygen.

Intellectually, I have my priorities in a slightly more sensible order. But physically …"

I twisted my head to kiss the palm of his hand.

He took a deep breath. I was surprised that it sounded a little unsteady.

"Bella, I could kill you," he whispered.

"I don't think you could."

Edward's eyes tightened. He lifted his hand from my face and reached quickly behind himself for something I couldn't see. There was a muffled snapping sound, and the bed quivered beneath us.

Something dark was in his hand; he held it up for my curious examination. It was a metal flower, one of the roses that adorned the wrought iron posts and canopy of his bed frame. His hand closed for a brief second, his fingers contracting gently, and then it opened again.

Without a word, he offered me the crushed, uneven lump of black metal. It was a cast of the inside of his hand, like a piece of play dough squeezed in a child's fist. A half-second passed, and the shape crumbled into black sand in his palm.

I glared. "That's not what I meant. I already know how strong you are. You didn't have to break the furniture."

"What did you mean then?" he asked in a dark voice, tossing the handful of iron sand to the corner of the room; it hit the wall with a sound like rain.

His eyes were intent on my face as I struggled to explain.

“Obviously not that you aren’t physically able hurt me, if you wanted to … More that, you don’t want to hurt me … so much so that I don’t think that you ever could.”

He started shaking his head before I was done.

“It might not work like that, Bella.”

“Might,” I scoffed. “You have no more idea what you’re talking about than I do.”

“Exactly. Do you imagine I would ever take that kind of risk with you?”

I stared into his eyes for a long minute. There was no sign of compromise, no hint of indecision in them.

“Please,” I finally whispered, hopeless. “It’s all I want. Please.” I closed my eyes in defeat, waiting for the quick and final no.

But he didn’t answer immediately. I hesitated in disbelief, stunned to hear that his breathing was uneven again.

I opened my eyes, and his face was torn.

“Please?” I whispered again, my heartbeat picking up speed. My words tumbled out as I rushed to take advantage of the sudden uncertainty in his eyes. “You don’t have to make me any guarantees. If it doesn’t work out right, well, then that’s that. Just let us try … only try. And I’ll give you what you want,” I promised rashly. “I’ll marry you. I’ll let you pay for Dartmouth, and I won’t complain about the bribe to

get me in. You can even buy me a fast car if that makes you happy! Just … please."

His icy arms tightened around me, and his lips were at my ear; his cool breath made me shiver. "This is unbearable. So many things I've wanted to give you — and this is what you decide to demand. Do you have any idea how painful it is, trying to refuse you when you plead with me this way?"

"Then don't refuse," I suggested breathlessly.

He didn't respond.

"Please," I tried again.

"Bella …" He shook his head slowly, but it didn't feel like a denial as his face, his lips, moved back and forth across my throat. It felt more like surrender. My heart, racing already, spluttered frantically.

Again, I took what advantage I could. When his face turned toward mine with the slow movement of his indecision, I twisted quickly in his arms till my lips reached his. His hands seized my face, and I thought he was going to push me away again.

I was wrong.

His mouth was not gentle; there was a brand-new edge of conflict and desperation in the way his lips moved. I locked my arms around his neck, and, to my suddenly overheated skin, his body felt colder than ever. I trembled, but it was not from the chill.

He didn't stop kissing me. I was the one who had to break away, gasping for air. Even then his lips did not leave my skin, they just moved to my throat. The thrill of victory was a strange high; it made me feel

powerful. Brave. My hands weren't unsteady now; I got through with the buttons on his shirt this time easily, and my fingers traced the perfect planes of his icy chest. He was too beautiful. What was the word he'd used just now? Unbearable — that was it. His beauty was too much to bear... .

I pulled his mouth back to mine, and he seemed just as eager as I was. One of his hands still cupped my face, his other arm was tight around my waist, straining me closer to him. It made it slightly more difficult as I tried to reach the front of my shirt, but not impossible.

Cold iron fetters locked around my wrists, and pulled my hands above my head, which was suddenly on a pillow.

His lips were at my ear again. "Bella," he murmured, his voice warm and velvet. "Would you please stop trying to take your clothes off?"

"Do you want to do that part?" I asked, confused.

"Not tonight," he answered softly. His lips were slower now against my cheek and jaw, all the urgency gone.

"Edward, don't —," I started to argue.

"I'm not saying no," he reassured me. "I'm just saying not tonight."

I thought about that while my breathing slowed.

"Give me one good reason why tonight is not as good as any other night." I was still breathless; it made the frustration in my voice less impressive.

"I wasn't born yesterday." He chuckled in my ear. "Out of the two of us, which do you think is more unwilling to give the other what they want? You just promised to marry me before you do any changing, but if I give in tonight, what guarantee do I have that you won't go running off to Carlisle in the morning? I am — clearly — much less reluctant to give you what you want. Therefore … you first."

I exhaled with a loud huff. "I have to marry you first?" I asked in disbelief.

"That's the deal — take it or leave it. Compromise, remember?"

His arms wrapped around me, and he began kissing me in a way that should be illegal. Too persuasive — it was duress, coercion. I tried to keep a clear head … and failed quickly and absolutely.

"I think that's a really bad idea," I gasped when he let me breathe.

"I'm not surprised you feel that way." He smirked. "You have a one-track mind."

"How did this happen?" I grumbled. "I thought I was holding my own tonight — for once — and now, all of a sudden —"

"You're engaged," he finished.

"Ew! Please don't say that out loud."

"Are you going back on your word?" he demanded. He pulled away to read my face. His expression was entertained. He was having fun.

I glared at him, trying to ignore the way his smile made my heart react.

"Are you?" he pressed.

"Ugh!" I groaned. "No. I'm not. Are you happy now?"

His smile was blinding. "Exceptionally."

I groaned again.

"Aren't you happy at all?"

He kissed me again before I could answer. Another too-persuasive kiss.

"A little bit," I admitted when I could speak. "But not about getting married."

He kissed me another time. "Do you get the feeling that everything is backward?" he laughed in my ear. "Traditionally, shouldn't you be arguing my side, and I yours?"

"There isn't much that's traditional about you and me."

"True."

He kissed me again, and kept going until my heart was racing and my skin was flushed.

"Look, Edward," I murmured, my voice wheedling, when he paused to kiss the palm of my hand. "I said I would marry you, and I will. I promise. I swear. If you want, I'll sign a contract in my own blood."

"Not funny," he murmured against the inside of my wrist.

"What I'm saying is this — I'm not going to trick you or anything. You know me better than that. So there's really no reason to wait. We're completely alone — how often does that happen? — and you've provided this very large and comfortable bed... ."

"Not tonight," he said again.

"Don't you trust me?"

"Of course I do."

Using the hand that he was still kissing, I pulled his face back up to where I could see his expression.

"Then what's the problem? It's not like you didn't know you were going to win in the end." I frowned and muttered, "You always win."

"Just hedging my bets," he said calmly.

"There's something else," I guessed, my eyes narrowing. There was a defensiveness about his face, a faint hint of some secret motive he was trying to hide behind his casual manner. "Are you planning to go back on your word?"

"No," he promised solemnly. "I swear to you, we will try. After you marry me."

I shook my head, and laughed glumly. "You make me feel like a villain in a melodrama — twirling my mustache while I try to steal some poor girl's virtue."

His eyes were wary as they flashed across my face, then he quickly ducked down to press his lips against my collarbone.

"That's it, isn't it?" The short laugh that escaped me was more shocked than amused. "You're trying to protect your virtue!" I covered my mouth with my hand to muffle the giggle that followed. The words were so ... old-fashioned.

"No, silly girl," he muttered against my shoulder. "I'm trying to protect yours. And you're making it shockingly difficult."

"Of all the ridiculous —"

"Let me ask you something," he interrupted quickly. "We've had this discussion before, but humor me. How many people in this room have a soul? A shot at heaven, or whatever there is after this life?"

"Two," I answered immediately, my voice fierce.

"All right. Maybe that's true. Now, there's a world full of dissension about this, but the vast majority seem to think that there are some rules that have to be followed."

"Vampire rules aren't enough for you? You want to worry about the human ones too?"

"It couldn't hurt." He shrugged. "Just in case."

I glared at him through narrowed eyes.

"Now, of course, it might be too late for me, even if you are right about my soul."

"No, it isn't," I argued angrily.

"'Thou shalt not kill' is commonly accepted by most major belief systems. And I've killed a lot of people, Bella."

"Only the bad ones."

He shrugged. "Maybe that counts, maybe it doesn't. But you haven't killed anyone —"

"That you know about," I muttered.

He smiled, but otherwise ignored the interruption. "And I'm going to do my best to keep you out of temptation's way."

"Okay. But we weren't fighting over committing murder," I reminded him.

"The same principle applies — the only difference is that this is the one area in which I'm just as spotless as you are. Can't I leave one rule unbroken?"

"One?"

"You know that I've stolen, I've lied, I've coveted … my virtue is all I have left." He grinned crookedly.

"I lie all the time."

"Yes, but you're such a bad liar that it doesn't really count. Nobody believes you."

"I really hope you're wrong about that — because otherwise Charlie is about to burst through the door with a loaded gun."

"Charlie is happier when he pretends to swallow your stories. He'd rather lie to himself than look too closely." He grinned at me.

"But what did you ever covet?" I asked doubtfully. "You have everything."

"I coveted you." His smile darkened. "I had no right to want you — but I reached out and took you anyway. And now look what's become of you! Trying to seduce a vampire." He shook his head in mock horror.

"You can covet what's already yours," I informed him. "Besides, I thought it was my virtue you were worried about."

"It is. If it's too late for me … Well, I'll be damned — no pun intended — if I'll let them keep you out, too."

"You can't make me go somewhere you won't be," I vowed. "That's my definition of hell. Anyway, I have an easy solution to all this: let's never die, all right?"

"Sounds simple enough. Why didn't I think of that?"

He smiled at me until I gave up with an angry humph. "So that's it. You won't sleep with me until we're married."

"Technically, I can't ever sleep with you."

I rolled my eyes. "Very mature, Edward."

"But, other than that detail, yes, you've got it right."

"I think you have an ulterior motive."

His eyes widened innocently. "Another one?"

"You know this will speed things up," I accused.

He tried not to smile. "There is only one thing I want to speed up, and the rest can wait forever … but for that, it's true, your impatient human hormones are my most powerful ally at this point."

“I can’t believe I’m going along with this. When I think of Charlie … and Renée! Can you imagine what Angela will think? Or Jessica? Ugh. I can hear the gossip now.”

He raised one eyebrow at me, and I knew why. What did it matter what they said about me when I leaving soon and not coming back? Was I really so oversensitive that I couldn’t bear a few weeks of sidelong glances and leading questions?

Maybe it wouldn’t bug me so much if I didn’t know that I would probably be gossiping just as condescendingly as the rest of them if it was someone else getting married this summer.

Gah. Married this summer! I shuddered.

And then, maybe it wouldn’t bug me so much if I hadn’t been raised to shudder at the thought of marriage.

Edward interrupted my fretting. “It doesn’t have to be a big production. I don’t need any fanfare. You won’t have to tell anyone or make any changes. We’ll go to Vegas — you can wear old jeans and we’ll go to the chapel with the drive-through window. I just want it to be official — that you belong to me and no one else.”

“It couldn’t be any more official than it already is,” I grumbled. But his description didn’t sound that bad. Only Alice would be disappointed.

“We’ll see about that.” He smiled complacently. “I suppose you don’t want your ring now?”

I had to swallow before I could speak. “You suppose correctly.”

He laughed at my expression. “That’s fine. I’ll get it on your finger soon enough.”

I glared at him. “You talk like you already have one.”

“I do,” he said, unashamed. “Ready to force upon you at the first sign of weakness.”

“You’re unbelievable.”

“Do you want to see it?” he asked. His liquid topaz eyes were suddenly shining with excitement.

“No!” I almost shouted, a reflex reaction. I regretted it at once. His face fell ever so slightly. “Unless you really want to show it to me,” I amended. I gritted my teeth together to keep my illogical terror from showing.

“That’s all right,” he shrugged. “It can wait.”

I sighed. “Show me the damn ring, Edward.”

He shook his head. “No.”

I studied his expression for a long minute.

“Please?” I asked quietly, experimenting with my newly discovered weapon. I touched his face lightly with the tips of my fingers. “Please can I see it?”

His eyes narrowed. “You are the most dangerous creature I’ve ever met,” he muttered. But he got up and moved with unconscious grace to kneel next to the small bedside table. He was back on the bed with me in an instant, sitting beside me with one arm around my shoulder. In his other hand was a little black box. He balanced it on my left knee.

“Go ahead and look, then,” he said brusquely.

It was harder than it should have been to pick up the inoffensive little box, but I didn’t want to hurt him again, so I tried to keep my hand from shaking. The surface was smooth with black satin. I brushed my fingers over it, hesitating.

“You didn’t spend a lot of money, did you? Lie to me, if you did.”

“I didn’t spend anything,” he assured me. “It’s just another hand-me-down. This is the ring my father gave to my mother.”

“Oh.” Surprise colored my voice. I pinched the lid between my thumb and forefinger, but didn’t open it.

“I supposed it’s a little outdated.” His tone was playfully apologetic. “Old-fashioned, just like me. I can get you something more modern. Something from Tiffany’s?”

“I like old-fashioned things,” I mumbled as I hesitantly lifted the lid.

Nestled into the black satin, Elizabeth Masen’s ring sparkled in the dim light. The face was a long oval, set with slanting rows of glittering round stones. The band was gold — delicate and narrow. The gold made a fragile web around the diamonds. I’d never seen anything like it.

Unthinkingly, I stroked the shimmering gems.

“It’s so pretty,” I murmured to myself, surprised.

“Do you like it?”

"It's beautiful." I shrugged, feigning a lack of interest. "What's not to like?"

He chuckled. "See if it fits."

My left hand clenched into a fist.

"Bella," he sighed. "I'm not going to solder it to your finger. Just try it on so I can see if it needs to be sized. Then you can take it right off."

"Fine," I grumbled.

I reached for the ring, but his long fingers beat me there. He took my left hand in his, and slid the ring into place on my third finger. He held my hand out, and we both examined the oval sparkling against my skin. It wasn't quite as awful as I'd feared, having it there.

"A perfect fit," he said indifferently. "That's nice — saves me a trip to the jeweler's."

I could hear some strong emotion burning under the casual tone of his voice, and I stared up at his face. It was there in his eyes, too, visible despite the careful nonchalance of his expression.

"You like that, don't you?" I asked suspiciously, fluttering my fingers and thinking that it was really too bad that I had not broken my left hand.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Sure," he said, still casual. "It looks very nice on you."

I stared into his eyes, trying to decipher the emotion that smoldered just under the surface. He gazed back, and the casual pretense suddenly slipped away. He was glowing — his angel's face brilliant with joy

and victory. He was so glorious that it knocked me breathless.

Before I could catch that breath, he was kissing me, his lips exultant. I was lightheaded when he moved his mouth to whisper in my ear — but his breathing was just as ragged as mine.

“Yes, I like it. You have no idea.”

I laughed, gasping a little. “I believe you.”

“Do you mind if I do something?” he murmured, his arms tightening around me.

“Anything you want.”

But he let me go and slid away.

“Anything but that,” I complained.

He ignored me, taking my hand and pulling me off the bed, too. He stood in front of me, hands on my shoulders, face serious.

“Now, I want to do this right. Please, please, keep in mind that you’ve already agreed to this, and don’t ruin it for me.”

“Oh, no,” I gasped as he slid down onto one knee.

“Be nice,” he muttered.

I took a deep breath.

“Isabella Swan?” He looked up at me through his impossibly long lashes, his golden eyes soft but, somehow, still scorching. “I promise to love you

forever — every single day of forever. Will you marry me?”

There were many things I wanted to say, some of them not nice at all, and others more disgustingly gooey and romantic than he probably dreamed I was capable of. Rather than embarrass myself with either, I whispered, “Yes.”

“Thank you,” he said simply. He took my left hand and kissed each of my fingertips before he kissed the ring that was now mine.

# Chapter 21

## TRAILS

I hated to waste any part of the night in sleep, but that was inevitable. The sun was bright outside the window-wall when I woke, with small clouds scuttling too quickly across the sky. The wind rocked the treetops till the whole forest looked as if it was going to shake apart.

He left me alone to get dressed, and I appreciated the chance to think. Somehow, my plan for last night had gone horribly awry, and I needed come to grips with the consequences. Though I'd given back the hand-me-down ring as soon as I could do it without hurting his feelings, my left hand felt heavier, like it was still in place, just invisible.

This shouldn't bother me, I reasoned. It was no big thing — a road trip to Vegas. I would go one better than old jeans — I would wear old sweats. The ceremony certainly couldn't take very long; no more than fifteen minutes at the most, right? So I could handle that.

And then, when it was over, he'd have to fulfill his side of the bargain. I would concentrate on that, and forget the rest.

He said I didn't have to tell anyone, and I was planning to hold him to that. Of course, it was very stupid of me not to think of Alice.

The Cullens got home around noon. There was a new, businesslike feel to the atmosphere around them, and it pulled me back into the enormity of what was coming.

Alice seemed to be in an unusually bad mood. I chalked it up to her frustration with feeling normal, because her first words to Edward were a complaint about working with the wolves.

"I think" — she made a face as she used the uncertain word — "that you're going to want to pack for cold weather, Edward. I can't see where you are exactly, because you're taking off with that dog this afternoon. But the storm that's coming seems particularly bad in that general area."

Edward nodded.

"It's going to snow on the mountains," she warned him.

"Ew, snow," I muttered to myself. It was June, for crying out loud.

"Wear a jacket," Alice told me. Her voice was unfriendly, and that surprised me. I tried to read her face, but she turned away.

I looked at Edward, and he was smiling; whatever was bugging Alice amused him.

Edward had more than enough camping gear to choose from — props in the human charade; the Cullens were good customers at the Newton's store. He grabbed a down sleeping bag, a small tent, and several packets of dehydrated food — grinning when I made a face at them — and stuffed them all in a backpack.

Alice wandered into the garage while we were there, watching Edward's preparations without a word. He ignored her.

When he was done packing, Edward handed me his phone. "Why don't you call Jacob and tell him we'll be ready for him in an hour or so. He knows where to meet us."

Jacob wasn't home, but Billy promised to call around until he could find an available werewolf to pass the news to.

"Don't you worry about Charlie, Bella," Billy said. "I've got my part of this under control."

"Yeah, I know Charlie'll be fine." I didn't feel so confident about his son's safety, but I didn't add that.

"I wish I could be with the rest of them tomorrow." Billy chuckled regretfully. "Being an old man is a hardship, Bella."

The urge to fight must be a defining characteristic of the Y chromosome. They were all the same.

"Have fun with Charlie."

"Good luck, Bella," he answered. "And … pass that along to the, er, Cullens for me."

"I will," I promised, surprised by the gesture.

As I gave the phone back to Edward, I saw that he and Alice were having some kind of silent discussion. She was staring at him, pleading in her eyes. He was frowning back, unhappy with whatever she wanted.

"Billy said to tell you 'good luck.'"

"That was generous of him," Edward said, breaking away from her.

“Bella, could I please speak to you alone?” Alice asked swiftly.

“You’re about to make my life harder than it needs to be, Alice,” Edward warned her through his teeth. “I’d really rather you didn’t.”

“This isn’t about you, Edward,” she shot back.

He laughed. Something about her response was funny to him.

“It’s not,” Alice insisted. “This is a female thing.”

He frowned.

“Let her talk to me,” I told him. I was curious.

“You asked for it,” he muttered. He laughed again — half angry, half amused — and strode out of the garage.

I turned to Alice, worried now, but she didn’t look at me. Her bad mood hadn’t passed yet.

She went to sit on the hood of her Porsche, her face dejected. I followed, and leaned against the bumper beside her.

“Bella?” Alice asked in a sad voice, shifting over and curling up against my side. Her voice sounded so miserable that I wrapped my arms around her shoulders in comfort.

“What’s wrong, Alice?”

“Don’t you love me?” she asked in that same sad tone.

“Of course I do. You know that.”

"Then why do I see you sneaking off to Vegas to get married without inviting me?"

"Oh," I muttered, my cheeks turning pink. I could see that I had seriously hurt her feelings, and I hurried to defend myself. "You know how I hate to make a big deal out of things. It was Edward's idea, anyway."

"I don't care whose idea it was. How could you do this to me? I expect that kind of thing from Edward, but not from you. I love you like you were my own sister."

"To me, Alice, you are my sister."

"Words!" she growled.

"Fine, you can come. There won't be much to see."

She was still grimacing.

"What?" I demanded.

"How much do you love me, Bella?"

"Why?"

She stared at me with pleading eyes, her long black eyebrows slanting up in the middle and pulling together, her lips trembling at the corners. It was a heart-breaking expression.

"Please, please, please," she whispered. "Please, Bella, please — if you really love me … Please let me do your wedding."

"Aw, Alice!" I groaned, pulling away and standing up. "No! Don't do this to me."

"If you really, truly love me, Bella."

I folded my arms across my chest. “That is so unfair. And Edward kind of already used that one on me.”

“I’ll bet Edward would like it better if you did this traditionally, though he’d never tell you that. And Esme — think what it would mean to her!”

I groaned. “I’d rather face the newborns alone.”

“I’ll owe you for a decade.”

“You’d owe me for a century!”

Her eyes glowed. “Is that a yes?”

“No! I don’t want to do this!”

“You won’t have to do anything but walk a few yards and then repeat after the minister.”

“Ugh! Ugh, ugh!”

“Please?” She started bouncing in place. “Please, please, please, please, please?”

“I’ll never, never ever forgive you for this, Alice.”

“Yay!” she squealed, clapping her hands together.

“That’s not a yes!”

“But it will be,” she sang.

“Edward!” I yelled, stalking out of the garage. “I know you’re listening. Get over here.” Alice was right behind me, still clapping.

“Thanks so much, Alice,” Edward said acidly, coming from behind me. I turned to let him have it, but his

expression was so worried and upset that I couldn't speak my complaints. I threw my arms around him instead, hiding my face, just in case the angry moisture in my eyes made it look like I was crying.

"Vegas," Edward promised in my ear.

"Not a chance," Alice gloated. "Bella would never do that to me. You know, Edward, as a brother, you are sometimes a disappointment."

"Don't be mean," I grumbled at her. "He's trying to make me happy, unlike you."

"I'm trying to make you happy, too, Bella. It's just that I know better what will make you happy … in the long run. You'll thank me for this. Maybe not for fifty years, but definitely someday."

"I never thought I'd see the day where I'd be willing to take a bet against you, Alice, but it has arrived."

She laughed her silvery laugh. "So, are you going to show me the ring?"

I grimaced in horror as she grabbed my left hand and then dropped it just as quickly.

"Huh. I saw him put it on you… . Did I miss something?" she asked. She concentrated for half a second, furrowing her brow, before she answered her own questions. "No. Wedding's still on."

"Bella has issues with jewelry," Edward explained.

"What's one more diamond? Well, I guess the ring has lots of diamonds, but my point is that he's already got one on —"

"Enough, Alice!" Edward cut her off suddenly. The way he glared at her … he looked like a vampire again. "We're in a hurry."

"I don't understand. What's that about diamonds?" I asked.

"We'll talk about it later," Alice said. "Edward is right — you'd better get going. You've got to set a trap and make camp before the storm comes." She frowned, and her expression was anxious, almost nervous. "Don't forget your coat, Bella. It seems … unseasonably cold."

"I've already got it," Edward assured her.

"Have a nice night," she told us in farewell.

It was twice as far to the clearing as usual; Edward took a long detour, making sure my scent would be nowhere near the trail Jacob would hide later. He carried me in his arms, the bulky backpack in my usual spot.

He stopped at the farthest end of the clearing and set me on my feet.

"All right. Just walk north for a ways, touching as much as you can. Alice gave me a clear picture of their path, and it won't take long for us to intersect it."

"North?"

He smiled and pointed out the right direction.

I wandered into the woods, leaving the clear yellow light of the strangely sunny day in the clearing behind me. Maybe Alice's blurred sight would be wrong about

the snow. I hoped so. The sky was mostly clear, though the wind whipped furiously through the open spaces. In the trees it was calmer, but much too cold for June — even in a long-sleeved shirt with a thick sweater over the top, there were goose bumps on my arms. I walked slowly, trailing my fingers over anything close enough: the rough tree bark, the wet ferns, the moss-covered rocks.

Edward stayed with me, walking a parallel line about twenty yards away.

“Am I doing this right?” I called.

“Perfectly.”

I had an idea. “Will this help?” I asked as I ran my fingers through my hair and caught a few loose strands. I draped them over the ferns.

“Yes, that does make the trail stronger. But you don’t need to pull your hair out, Bella. It will be fine.”

“I’ve got a few extras I can spare.”

It was gloomy under the trees, and I wished I could walk closer to Edward and hold his hand.

I wedged another hair into a broken branch that cut through my path.

“You don’t need to let Alice have her way, you know,” Edward said.

“Don’t worry about it, Edward. I’m not going to leave you at the altar, regardless.” I had a sinking feeling that Alice was going to get her way, mostly because she was totally unscrupulous when there was

something she wanted, and also because I was a sucker for guilt trips.

"That's not what I'm worried about. I want this to be what you want it to be."

I repressed a sigh. It would hurt his feelings if I told the truth — that it didn't really matter, because it was all just varying degrees of awful anyway.

"Well, even if she does get her way, we can keep it small. Just us. Emmett can get a clerical license off the Internet."

I giggled. "That does sound better." It wouldn't feel very official if Emmett read the vows, which was a plus. But I'd have a hard time keeping a straight face.

"See," he said with a smile. "There's always a compromise."

It took a while for me to reach the spot where the newborn army would be certain to cross my trail, but Edward never got impatient with my pace.

He had to lead a bit more on the way back, to keep me on the same path. It all looked alike to me.

We were almost to the clearing when I fell. I could see the wide opening ahead, and that's probably why I got too eager and forgot to watch my feet. I caught myself before my head bashed into the nearest tree, but a small branch snapped off under my left hand and gouged into my palm.

"Ouch! Oh, fabulous," I muttered.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Stay where you are. I'm bleeding. It will stop in a minute."

He ignored me. He was right there before I could finish.

"I've got a first aid kit," he said, pulling off the backpack. "I had a feeling I might need it."

"It's not bad. I can take care of it — you don't have to make yourself uncomfortable."

"I'm not uncomfortable," he said calmly. "Here — let me clean it."

"Wait a second, I just got another idea."

Without looking at the blood and breathing through my mouth, just in case my stomach might react, I pressed my hand against a rock within my reach.

"What are you doing?"

"Jasper will love this," I muttered to myself. I started for the clearing again, pressing my palm against everything in my path. "I'll bet this really gets them going."

Edward sighed.

"Hold your breath," I told him.

"I'm fine. I just think you're going overboard."

"This is all I get to do. I want to do a good job."

We broke through the last of the trees as I spoke. I let my injured hand graze across the ferns.

“Well, you have,” Edward assured me. “The newborns will be frantic, and Jasper will be very impressed with your dedication. Now let me treat your hand — you’ve gotten the cut dirty.”

“Let me do it, please.”

He took my hand and smiled as he examined it. “This doesn’t bother me anymore.”

I watched him carefully as he cleaned the gash, looking for some sign of distress. He continued to breathe evenly in and out, the same small smile on his lips.

“Why not?” I finally asked as he smoothed a bandage across my palm.

He shrugged. “I got over it.”

“You … got over it? When? How?” I tried to remember the last time he’d held his breath around me. All I could think of was my wretched birthday party last September.

Edward pursed his lips, seeming to search for the words. “I lived through an entire twenty-four hours thinking that you were dead, Bella. That changed the way I look at a lot of things.”

“Did it change the way I smell to you?”

“Not at all. But … having experienced the way it feels to think I’ve lost you … my reactions have changed. My entire being shies away from any course that could inspire that kind of pain again.”

I didn’t know what to say to that.

He smiled at my expression. “I guess that you could call it a very educational experience.”

The wind tore through the clearing then, lashing my hair around my face and making me shiver.

“All right,” he said, reaching into his pack again. “You’ve done your part.” He pulled out my heavy winter jacket and held it out for me to slide my arms in. “Now it’s out of our hands. Let’s go camping!”

I laughed at the mock enthusiasm in his voice.

He took my bandaged hand — the other was in worse shape, still in the brace — and started toward the other side of the clearing.

“Where are we meeting Jacob?” I asked.

“Right here.” He gestured to the trees in front of us just as Jacob stepped warily from their shadows.

It shouldn’t have surprised me to see him human. I wasn’t sure why I’d been looking for the big red-brown wolf.

Jacob seemed bigger again — no doubt a product of my expectations; I must have unconsciously been hoping to see the smaller Jacob from my memory, the easygoing friend who hadn’t made everything so difficult. He had his arms folded across his bare chest, a jacket clutched in one fist. His face was expressionless as he watched us.

Edward’s lips pulled down at the corners. “There had to have been a better way to do this.”

“Too late now,” I muttered glumly.

He sighed.

“Hey, Jake,” I greeted him when we got closer.

“Hi, Bella.”

“Hello, Jacob,” Edward said.

Jacob ignored the pleasantry, all business. “Where do I take her?”

Edward pulled a map from a side pocket on the pack and offered it to him. Jacob unfolded it.

“We’re here now,” Edward said, reaching over to touch the right spot. Jacob recoiled from his hand automatically, and then steadied himself. Edward pretended not to notice.

“And you’re taking her up here,” Edward continued, tracing a serpentine pattern around the elevation lines on the paper. “Roughly nine miles.”

Jacob nodded once.

“When you’re about a mile away, you should cross my path. That will lead you in. Do you need the map?”

“No, thanks. I know this area pretty well. I think I know where I’m going.”

Jacob seemed to have to work harder than Edward to keep the tone polite.

“I’ll take a longer route,” Edward said. “And I’ll see you in a few hours.”

Edward stared at me unhappily. He didn’t like this part of the plan.

"See you," I murmured.

Edward faded into the trees, heading in the opposite direction.

As soon as he was gone, Jacob turned cheerful.

"What's up, Bella?" he asked with a big grin.

I rolled my eyes. "Same old, same old."

"Yeah," he agreed. "Bunch of vampires trying to kill you. The usual."

"The usual."

"Well," he said as he shrugged into his jacket to free his arms. "Let's get going."

Making a face, I took a small step closer to him.

He bent down and swept his arm behind my knees, knocking them out from under me. His other arm caught me before my head hit the ground.

"Jerk," I muttered.

Jacob chuckled, already running through the trees. He kept a steady pace, a brisk jog that a fit human could keep up with ... across a level plane ... if they weren't burdened with a hundred-plus pounds as he was.

"You don't have to run. You'll get tired."

"Running doesn't make me tired," he said. His breathing was even — like the fixed tempo of a marathoner. "Besides, it will be colder soon. I hope he gets the camp set up before we get there."

I tapped my finger against the thick padding of his parka. “I thought you didn’t get cold now.”

“I don’t. I brought this for you, just in case you weren’t prepared.” He looked at my jacket, almost as if he were disappointed that I was. “I don’t like the way the weather feels. It’s making me edgy. Notice how we haven’t seen any animals?”

“Um, not really.”

“I guess you wouldn’t. Your senses are too dull.”

I let that pass. “Alice was worried about the storm, too.”

“It takes a lot to silence the forest this way. You picked a hell of a night for a camping trip.”

“It wasn’t entirely my idea.”

The pathless way he took began to climb more and more steeply, but it didn’t slow him down. He leapt easily from rock to rock, not seeming to need his hands at all. His perfect balance reminded me of a mountain goat.

“What’s with the addition to your bracelet?” he asked.

I looked down, and realized that the crystal heart was facing up on my wrist.

I shrugged guiltily. “Another graduation present.”

He snorted. “A rock. Figures.”

A rock? I was suddenly reminded of Alice’s unfinished sentence outside the garage. I stared at the bright white crystal and tried to remember what Alice had

been saying before … about diamonds. Could she have been trying to say he's already got one on you? As in, I was already wearing one diamond from Edward? No, that was impossible. The heart would have to be five carats or something crazy like that! Edward wouldn't —

"So it's been a while since you came down to La Push," Jacob said, interrupting my disturbing conjectures.

"I've been busy," I told him. "And … I probably wouldn't have visited, anyway."

He grimaced. "I thought you were supposed to be the forgiving one, and I was the grudge-holder."

I shrugged.

"Been thinking about that last time a lot, have you?"

"Nope."

He laughed. "Either you're lying, or you are the stubbornest person alive."

"I don't know about the second part, but I'm not lying."

I didn't like having this conversation under the present conditions — with his too-warm arms wrapped tightly around me and nothing at all I could do about it. His face was closer than I wanted it to be. I wished I could take a step back.

"A smart person looks at all sides of a decision."

"I have," I retorted.

"If you haven't thought at all about our … er, conversation the last time you came over, then that's not true."

"That conversation isn't relevant to my decision."

"Some people will go to any lengths to delude themselves."

"I've noticed that werewolves in particular are prone to that mistake — do you think it's a genetic thing?"

"Does that mean that he's a better kisser that I am?" Jacob asked, suddenly glum.

"I really couldn't say, Jake. Edward is the only person I've ever kissed."

"Besides me."

"But I don't count that as a kiss, Jacob. I think of it more as an assault."

"Ouch! That's cold."

I shrugged. I wasn't going to take it back.

"I did apologize about that," he reminded me.

"And I forgave you … mostly. It doesn't change the way I remember it."

He muttered something unintelligible.

It was quiet then for a while; there was just the sound of his measured breathing and the wind roaring high above us in the treetops. A cliff face rose sheer beside us, bare, rough gray stone. We followed the base as it curved upward out of the forest.

“I still think it’s pretty irresponsible,” Jacob suddenly said.

“Whatever you’re talking about, you’re wrong.”

“Think about it, Bella. According to you, you’ve kissed just one person — who isn’t even really a person — in your whole life, and you’re calling it quits? How do you know that’s what you want? Shouldn’t you play the field a little?”

I kept my voice cool. “I know exactly what I want.”

“Then it couldn’t hurt to double check. Maybe you should try kissing someone else — just for comparison’s sake … since what happened the other day doesn’t count. You could kiss me, for example. I don’t mind if you want to use me to experiment.”

He pulled me tighter against his chest, so that my face was closer to his. He was smiling at his joke, but I wasn’t taking any chances.

“Don’t mess with me, Jake. I swear I won’t stop him if he wants to break your jaw.”

The panicky edge to my voice made him smile wider. “If you ask me to kiss you, he won’t have any reason to get upset. He said that was fine.”

“Don’t hold your breath, Jake — no, wait, I changed my mind. Go right ahead. Just hold your breath until I ask you to kiss me.”

“You’re in a bad mood today.”

“I wonder why?”

“Sometimes I think you like me better as a wolf.”

"Sometimes I do. It probably has something to do with the way you can't talk."

He pursed his broad lips thoughtfully. "No, I don't think that's it. I think it's easier for you to be near me when I'm not human, because you don't have to pretend that you're not attracted to me."

My mouth fell open with a little popping sound. I snapped it shut at once, grinding my teeth together.

He heard that. His lips pulled tightly across his face in a triumphant smile.

I took a slow breath before I spoke. "No. I'm pretty sure it's because you can't talk."

He sighed. "Do you ever get tired of lying to yourself? You have to know how aware you are of me. Physically, I mean."

"How could anyone not be aware of you physically, Jacob?" I demanded. "You're an enormous monster who refuses to respect anyone else's personal space."

"I make you nervous. But only when I'm human. When I'm a wolf, you're more comfortable around me."

"Nervousness and irritation are not the same thing."

He stared at me for a minute, slowing to a walk, the amusement draining from his face. His eyes narrowed, turned black in the shadow of his brows. His breathing, so regular as he ran, started to accelerate. Slowly, he leaned his face closer to mine.

I stared him down, knowing exactly what he was trying to do.

"It's your face," I reminded him.

He laughed loudly and started jogging again. "I don't really want to fight with your vampire tonight — I mean, any other night, sure. But we both have a job to do tomorrow, and I wouldn't want to leave the Cullens one short."

The sudden, unexpected swell of shame distorted my expression.

"I know, I know," he responded, not understanding. "You think he could take me."

I couldn't speak. I was leaving them one short. What if someone got hurt because I was so weak? But what if I was brave and Edward … I couldn't even think it.

"What's the matter with you, Bella?" The joking bravado vanished from his face, revealing my Jacob underneath, like pulling a mask away. "If something I said upset you, you know I was only kidding. I didn't mean anything — hey, are you okay? Don't cry, Bella," he pled.

I tried to pull myself together. "I'm not going to cry."

"What did I say?"

"It's nothing you said. It's just, well, it's me. I did something … bad."

He stared at me, his eyes wide with confusion.

"Edward isn't going to fight tomorrow," I whispered the explanation. "I'm making him stay with me. I am a huge coward."

He frowned. “You think this isn’t going to work? That they’ll find you here? Do you know something I don’t know?”

“No, no. I’m not afraid of that. I just … I can’t let him go. If he didn’t come back …” I shuddered, closing my eyes to escape the thought.

Jacob was quiet.

I kept whispering, my eyes shut. “If anyone gets hurt, it will always be my fault. And even if no one does … I was horrible. I had to be, to convince him to stay with me. He won’t hold it against me, but I’ll always know what I’m capable of.” I felt just a tiny bit better, getting this off my chest. Even if I could only confess it to Jacob.

He snorted. My eyes opened slowly, and I was sad to see that the hard mask was back.

“I can’t believe he let you talk him out of going. I wouldn’t miss this for anything.”

I sighed. “I know.”

“That doesn’t mean anything, though.” He was suddenly backtracking. “That doesn’t mean that he loves you more than I do.”

“But you wouldn’t stay with me, even if I begged.”

He pursed his lips for a moment, and I wondered if he would try to deny it. We both knew the truth. “That’s only because I know you better,” he said at last. “Everything’s going to go without a hitch. Even if you’d asked and I’d said no, you wouldn’t be mad at me afterwards.”

"If everything does go without a hitch, you're probably right. I wouldn't be mad. But the whole time you're gone, I'll be sick with worry, Jake. Crazy with it."

"Why?" he asked gruffly. "Why does it matter to you if something happens to me?"

"Don't say that. You know how much you mean to me. I'm sorry it's not in the way you want, but that's just how it is. You're my best friend. At least, you used to be. And still sometimes are … when you let your guard down."

He smiled the old smile that I loved. "I'm always that," he promised. "Even when I don't … behave as well as I should. Underneath, I'm always in here."

"I know. Why else would I put up with all of your crap?"

He laughed with me, and then his eyes were sad. "When are you finally going to figure out that you're in love with me, too?"

"Leave it to you to ruin the moment."

"I'm not saying you don't love him. I'm not stupid. But it's possible to love more than one person at a time, Bella. I've seen it in action."

"I'm not some freaky werewolf, Jacob."

He wrinkled his nose, and I was about to apologize for that last jab, but he changed the subject.

"We're not far now, I can smell him."

I sighed in relief.

He misinterpreted my meaning. “I’d happily slow down, Bella, but you’re going to want to be under shelter before that hits.”

We both looked up at the sky.

A solid wall of purple-black cloud was racing in from the west, blackening the forest beneath it as it came.

“Wow,” I muttered. “You’d better hurry, Jake. You’ll want to get home before it gets here.”

“I’m not going home.”

I glared at him, exasperated. “You’re not camping with us.”

“Not technically — as in, sharing your tent or anything. I prefer the storm to the smell. But I’m sure your bloodsucker will want to keep in touch with the pack for coordination purposes, and so I will graciously provide that service.”

“I thought that was Seth’s job.”

“He’ll take over tomorrow, during the fight.”

The reminder silenced me for a second. I stared at him, worry springing up again with sudden fierceness.

“I don’t suppose there’s any way you’d just stay since you’re already here?” I suggested. “If I did beg? Or trade back the lifetime of servitude or something?”

“Tempting, but no. Then again, the begging might be interesting to see. You can give it a go if you like.”

“There’s really nothing, nothing at all I can say?”

“Nope. Not unless you can promise me a better fight. Anyway, Sam’s calling the shots, not me.”

That reminded me.

“Edward told me something the other day … about you.”

He bristled. “It’s probably a lie.”

“Oh, really? You aren’t second in command of the pack, then?”

He blinked, his face going blank with surprise. “Oh. That.”

“How come you never told me that?”

“Why would I? It’s no big thing.”

“I don’t know. Why not? It’s interesting. So, how does that work? How did Sam end up as the Alpha, and you as the … the Beta?”

Jacob chuckled at my invented term. “Sam was the first, the oldest. It made sense for him to take charge.”

I frowned. “But shouldn’t Jared or Paul be second, then? They were the next to change.”

“Well … it’s hard to explain,” Jacob said evasively.

“Try.”

He sighed. “It’s more about the lineage, you know? Sort of old-fashioned. Why should it matter who your grandpa was, right?”

I remembered something Jacob had told me a long time ago, before either of us had known anything about werewolves.

“Didn’t you say that Ephraim Black was the last chief the Quileutes had?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Because he was the Alpha. Did you know that, technically, Sam’s the chief of the whole tribe now?” He laughed. “Crazy traditions.”

I thought about that for a second, trying to make all the pieces fit. “But you also said that people listened to your dad more than anyone else on the council, because he was Ephraim’s grandson?”

“What about it?”

“Well, if it’s about the lineage ... shouldn’t you be the chief, then?”

Jacob didn’t answer me. He stared into the darkening forest, as if he suddenly needed to concentrate on where he was going.

“Jake?”

“No. That’s Sam’s job.” He kept his eyes on our pathless course.

“Why? His great-granddad was Levi Uley, right? Was Levi an Alpha, too?”

“There’s only one Alpha,” he answered automatically.

“So what was Levi?”

“Sort of a Beta, I guess.” He snorted at my term. “Like me.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I just want to understand.”

Jacob finally met my confused gaze, and then sighed. “Yeah. I was supposed to be the Alpha.”

My eyebrows pulled together. “Sam didn’t want to step down?”

“Hardly. I didn’t want to step up.”

“Why not?”

He frowned, uncomfortable with my questions. Well, it was his turn to feel uncomfortable.

“I didn’t want any of it, Bella. I didn’t want anything to change. I didn’t want to be some legendary chief. I didn’t want to be part of a pack of werewolves, let alone their leader. I wouldn’t take it when Sam offered.”

I thought about this for a long moment. Jacob didn’t interrupt. He stared into the forest again.

“But I thought you were happier. That you were okay with this,” I finally whispered.

Jacob smiled down at me reassuringly. “Yeah. It’s really not so bad. Exciting sometimes, like with this thing tomorrow. But at first it sort of felt like being drafted into a war you didn’t know existed. There was no choice, you know? And it was so final.” He shrugged. “Anyway, I guess I’m glad now. It has to be done, and could I trust someone else to get it right? It’s better to make sure myself.”

I stared at him, feeling an unexpected kind of awe for my friend. He was more of a grown-up than I'd ever given him credit for. Like with Billy the other night at the bonfire, there was a majesty here that I'd never suspected.

"Chief Jacob," I whispered, smiling at the way the words sounded together.

He rolled his eyes.

Just then, the wind shook more fiercely through the trees around us, and it felt like it was blowing straight off a glacier. The sharp sound of wood cracking echoed off the mountain. Though the light was vanishing as the grisly cloud covered the sky, I could still see the little white specks that fluttered past us.

Jacob stepped up the pace, keeping his eyes on the ground now as he flat out sprinted. I curled more willingly against his chest, recoiling from the unwelcome snow.

It was only minutes later that he dashed around to the lee side of the stony peak and we could see the little tent nestled up against the sheltering face. More flurries were falling around us, but the wind was too fierce to let them settle anywhere.

"Bella!" Edward called out in acute relief. We'd caught him in the middle of pacing back and forth across the little open space.

He flashed to my side, sort of blurring as he moved so swiftly. Jacob cringed, and then set me on my feet. Edward ignored his reaction and caught me in a tight hug.

“Thank you,” Edward said over my head. His tone was unmistakably sincere. “That was quicker than I expected, and I truly appreciate it.”

I twisted to see Jacob’s response.

Jacob merely shrugged, all the friendliness wiped clean from his face. “Get her inside. This is going to be bad — my hair’s standing up on my scalp. Is that tent secure?”

“I all but welded it to the rock.”

“Good.”

Jacob looked up at the sky — now black with the storm, sprinkled with the swirling bits of snow. His nostrils flared.

“I’m going to change,” he said. “I want to know what’s going on back home.”

He hung his jacket on a low, stubby branch, and walked into the murky forest without a backward glance.

# Chapter 22

## FIRE AND ICE

The wind shook the tent again, and I shook with it.

The temperature was dropping. I could feel it through the down bag, through my jacket. I was fully dressed, my hiking boots still laced into place. It didn't make any difference. How could it be so cold? How could it keep getting colder? It had to bottom out sometime, didn't it?

"W-w-w-w-w-what t-t-t-t-time is it?" I forced the words through my rattling teeth.

"Two," Edward answered.

Edward sat as far from me as possible in the cramped space, afraid to even breathe on me when I was already so cold. It was too dark to see his face, but his voice was wild with worry, indecision, and frustration.

"Maybe ..."

"No, I'm f-f-f-f-f-fine, r-r-r-really. I don't w-w-w-want to g-go outside."

He'd tried to talk me into making a run for it a dozen times already, but I was terrified of leaving my shelter. If it was this cold in here, protected from the raging wind, I could imagine how bad it would be if we were running through it.

And it would waste all our efforts this afternoon. Would we have enough time to reset ourselves when the storm was over? What if it didn't end? It made no

sense to move now. I could shiver my way through one night.

I was worried that the trail I had laid would be lost, but he promised that it would still be plain to the coming monsters.

“What can I do?” he almost begged.

I just shook my head.

Out in the snow, Jacob whined unhappily.

“G-g-g-get out of h-h-h-ere,” I ordered, again.

“He’s just worried about you,” Edward translated. “He’s fine. His body is equipped to deal with this.”

“H-h-h-h-h-h.” I wanted to say that he should still leave, but I couldn’t get it past my teeth. I nearly bit my tongue off trying. At least Jacob did seem to be well equipped for the snow, better even than the others in his pack with his thicker, longer, shaggy russet fur. I wondered why that was.

Jacob whimpered, a high-pitched, grating sound of complaint.

“What do you want me to do?” Edward growled, too anxious to bother with politeness anymore. “Carry her through that? I don’t see you making yourself useful. Why don’t you go fetch a space heater or something?”

“I’m ok-k-k-k-k-k-kay,” I protested. Judging from Edward’s groan and the muted growl outside the tent, I hadn’t convinced anyone. The wind rocked the tent roughly, and I shuddered in harmony with it.

A sudden howl ripped through the roar of the wind, and I covered my ears against the noise. Edward scowled.

“That was hardly necessary,” he muttered. “And that’s the worst idea I’ve ever heard,” he called more loudly.

“Better than anything you’ve come up with,” Jacob answered, his human voice startling me. “Go fetch a space heater,” he grumbled. “I’m not a St. Bernard.”

I heard the sound of the zipper around the tent door pulling swiftly down.

Jacob slid through the smallest opening he could manage, while the arctic air flowed in around him, a few flecks of snow falling to the floor of the tent. I shivered so hard it was a convulsion.

“I don’t like this,” Edward hissed as Jake zipped the tent door shut. “Just give her the coat and get out.”

My eyes were adjusted enough to see shapes — Jacob was carrying the parka that had been hanging on a tree next to the tent.

I tried to ask what they were talking about, but all that came out of my mouth was, “W-w-w-w-w-w,” as the shivering made me stutter uncontrollably.

“The parka’s for tomorrow — she’s too cold to warm it up by herself. It’s frozen.” He dropped it by the door. “You said she needed a space heater, and here I am.” Jacob held his arms as wide as the tent allowed. As usual, when he’d been running around as a wolf, he’d only thrown on the bare essentials — just a pair of sweats, no shirt, no shoes.

“J-J-J-J-Jake, you’ll f-f-f-freez-z-z-ze,” I tried to complain.

“Not me,” he said cheerfully. “I run at a toasty one-oh-eight point nine these days. I’ll have you sweating in no time.”

Edward snarled, but Jacob didn’t even look at him. Instead, he crawled to my side and started unzipping my sleeping bag.

Edward’s hand was suddenly hard on his shoulder, restraining, snow white against the dark skin. Jacob’s jaw clenched, his nostrils flaring, his body recoiling from the cold touch. The long muscles in his arms flexed automatically.

“Get your hand off of me,” he growled through his teeth.

“Keep your hands off of her,” Edward answered blackly.

“D-d-d-don’t f-f-f-f-fight,” I pleaded. Another tremor rocked through me. It felt like my teeth were going to shatter, they were slamming together so hard.

“I’m sure she’ll thank you for this when her toes turn black and drop off,” Jacob snapped.

Edward hesitated, then his hand fell away and he slid back to his position in the corner.

His voice was flat and frightening. “Watch yourself.”

Jacob chuckled.

“Scoot over, Bella,” he said, zipping the sleeping bag open farther.

I stared at him in outrage. No wonder Edward was reacting this way.

“N-n-n-n-n,” I tried to protest.

“Don’t be stupid,” he said, exasperated. “Don’t you like having ten toes?”

He crammed his body into the nonexistent space, forcing the zipper up behind himself.

And then I couldn’t object — I didn’t want to anymore. He was so warm. His arms constricted around me, holding me snugly against his bare chest. The heat was irresistible, like air after being underwater for too long. He cringed when I pressed my icy fingers eagerly against his skin.

“Jeez, you’re freezing, Bella,” he complained.

“S-s-s-s-sorry,” I stuttered.

“Try to relax,” he suggested as another shiver rippled through me violently. “You’ll be warm in a minute. Of course, you’d warm up faster if you took your clothes off.”

Edward growled sharply.

“That’s just a simple fact,” Jacob defended himself. “Survival one-oh-one.”

“C-c-cut it out, Jake,” I said angrily, though my body refused to even try to pull away from him. “N-n-n-nobody really n-n-n-n-needs all ten t-t-t-toes.”

“Don’t worry about the bloodsucker,” Jacob suggested, and his tone was smug. “He’s just jealous.”

“Of course I am.” Edward’s voice was velvet again, under control, a musical murmur in the darkness. “You don’t have the faintest idea how much I wish I could do what you’re doing for her, mongrel.”

“Those are the breaks,” Jacob said lightly, but then his tone soured. “At least you know she wishes it was you.”

“True,” Edward agreed.

The shuddering slowed, became bearable while they wrangled.

“There,” Jacob said, pleased. “Feeling better?”

I was finally able to speak clearly. “Yes.”

“Your lips are still blue,” he mused. “Want me to warm those up for you, too? You only have to ask.”

Edward sighed heavily.

“Behave yourself,” I muttered, pressing my face against his shoulder. He flinched again when my cold skin touched his, and I smiled with slightly vindictive satisfaction.

It was already warm and snug inside the sleeping bag. Jacob’s body heat seemed to radiate from every side — maybe because there was so much of him. I kicked my boots off, and pushed my toes against his legs. He jumped slightly, and then leaned his head down to press his hot cheek against my numb ear.

I noticed that Jacob’s skin had a woodsy, musky scent — it fit the setting, here in the middle of the forest. It was nice. I wondered if the Cullens and the Quileutes weren’t just playing up that whole odor

issue because of their prejudices. Everyone smelled fine to me.

The storm howled like an animal attacking the tent, but it didn't worry me now. Jacob was out of the cold, and so was I. Plus, I was simply too exhausted to worry about anything — tired from just staying awake so late, and aching from the muscle spasms. My body relaxed slowly as I thawed, piece by frozen piece, and then turned limp.

"Jake?" I mumbled sleepily. "Can I ask you something? I'm not trying to be a jerk or anything, I'm honestly curious." They were the same words he'd used in my kitchen … how long ago was it now?

"Sure," he chuckled, remembering.

"Why are you so much furrier than your friends? You don't have to answer if I'm being rude." I didn't know the rules for etiquette as they applied to werewolf culture.

"Because my hair is longer," he said, amused — my question hadn't offended him, at least. He shook his head so that his unkempt hair — grown out to his chin now — tickled my cheek.

"Oh." I was surprised, but it made sense. So that was why they'd all cropped their hair in the beginning, when they joined the pack. "Then why don't you cut it? Do you like to be shaggy?"

He didn't answer right away this time, and Edward laughed under his breath.

"Sorry," I said, pausing to yawn. "I didn't mean to pry. You don't have to tell me."

Jacob made an annoyed sound. “Oh, he’ll tell you anyway, so I might as well… . I was growing my hair out because … it seemed like you liked it better long.”

“Oh.” I felt awkward. “I, er, like it both ways, Jake. You don’t need to be … inconvenienced.”

He shrugged. “Turns out it was very convenient tonight, so don’t worry about it.”

I didn’t have anything else to say. As the silence lengthened, my eyelids drooped and shut, and my breathing grew slower, more even.

“That’s right, honey, go to sleep,” Jacob whispered.

I sighed, content, already half-unconscious.

“Seth is here,” Edward muttered to Jacob, and I suddenly understood the point of the howling.

“Perfect. Now you can keep an eye on everything else, while I take care of your girlfriend for you.”

Edward didn’t answer, but I groaned groggily. “Stop it,” I muttered.

It was quiet then, inside at least. Outside, the wind shrieked insanely through the trees. The shimmying of the tent made it hard to sleep. The poles would suddenly jerk and quiver, pulling me back from the edge of unconsciousness each time I was close to slipping under. I felt so bad for the wolf, the boy that was stuck outside in the snow.

My mind wandered as I waited for sleep to find me. This warm little space made me think of the early days with Jacob, and I remembered how it used to be when he was my replacement sun, the warmth that

made my empty life livable. It had been a while since I'd thought of Jake that way, but here he was, warming me again.

"Please!" Edward hissed. "Do you mind!"

"What?" Jacob whispered back, his tone surprised.

"Do you think you could attempt to control your thoughts?" Edward's low whisper was furious.

"No one said you had to listen," Jacob muttered, defiant, yet still embarrassed. "Get out of my head."

"I wish I could. You have no idea how loud your little fantasies are. It's like you're shouting them at me."

"I'll try to keep it down," Jacob whispered sarcastically.

There was a brief moment of silence.

"Yes," Edward answered an unspoken thought in a murmur so low I barely made it out. "I'm jealous of that, too."

"I figured it was like that," Jacob whispered smugly. "Sort of evens the playing field up a little, doesn't it?"

Edward chuckled. "In your dreams."

"You know, she could still change her mind," Jacob taunted him. "Considering all the things I could do with her that you can't. At least, not without killing her, that is."

"Go to sleep, Jacob," Edward murmured. "You're starting to get on my nerves."

"I think I will. I'm really very comfortable."

Edward didn't answer.

I was too far gone to ask them to stop talking about me like I wasn't there. The conversation had taken on a dreamlike quality to me, and I wasn't sure I was really awake.

"Maybe I would," Edward said after a moment, answering a question I hadn't heard.

"But would you be honest?"

"You can always ask and see." Edward's tone made me wonder if I was missing out on a joke.

"Well, you see inside my head — let me see inside yours tonight, it's only fair," Jacob said.

"Your head is full of questions. Which one do you want me to answer?"

"The jealousy … it has to be eating at you. You can't be as sure of yourself as you seem. Unless you have no emotions at all."

"Of course it is," Edward agreed, no longer amused. "Right now it's so bad that I can barely control my voice. Of course, it's even worse when she's away from me, with you, and I can't see her."

"Do you think about it all the time?" Jacob whispered. "Does it make it hard to concentrate when she's not with you?"

"Yes and no," Edward said; he seemed determined to answer honestly. "My mind doesn't work quite the same as yours. I can think of many more things at

one time. Of course, that means that I'm always able to think of you, always able to wonder if that's where her mind is, when she's quiet and thoughtful."

They were both still for a minute.

"Yes, I would guess that she thinks about you often," Edward murmured in response to Jacob's thoughts. "More often than I like. She worries that you're unhappy. Not that you don't know that. Not that you don't use that."

"I have to use whatever I can," Jacob muttered. "I'm not working with your advantages — advantages like her knowing she's in love with you."

"That helps," Edward agreed in a mild tone.

Jacob was defiant. "She's in love with me, too, you know."

Edward didn't answer.

Jacob sighed. "But she doesn't know it."

"I can't tell you if you're right."

"Does that bother you? Do you wish you could see what she's thinking, too?"

"Yes … and no, again. She likes it better this way, and, though it sometimes drives me insane, I'd rather she was happy."

The wind ripped around the tent, shaking it like an earthquake. Jacob's arms tightened around me protectively.

"Thank you," Edward whispered. "Odd as this might sound, I suppose I'm glad you're here, Jacob."

"You mean, 'as much as I'd love to kill you, I'm glad she's warm,' right?"

"It's an uncomfortable truce, isn't it?"

Jacob's whisper was suddenly smug. "I knew you were just as crazy jealous as I am."

"I'm not such a fool as to wear it on my sleeve like you do. It doesn't help your case, you know."

"You have more patience than I do."

"I should. I've had a hundred years to gain it. A hundred years of waiting for her."

"So … at what point did you decide to play the very patient good guy?"

"When I saw how much it was hurting her to make her choose. It's not usually this difficult to control. I can smother the … less civilized feelings I may have for you fairly easily most of the time. Sometimes I think she sees through me, but I can't be sure."

"I think you were just worried that if you really forced her to choose, she might not choose you."

Edward didn't answer right away. "That was a part of it," he finally admitted. "But only a small part. We all have our moments of doubt. Mostly I was worried that she'd hurt herself trying to sneak away to see you. After I'd accepted that she was more or less safe with you — as safe as Bella ever is — it seemed best to stop driving her to extremes."

Jacob sighed. “I’d tell her all of this, but she’d never believe me.”

“I know.” It sounded like Edward was smiling.

“You think you know everything,” Jacob muttered.

“I don’t know the future,” Edward said, his voice suddenly unsure.

There was a long pause.

“What would you do if she changed her mind?” Jacob asked.

“I don’t know that either.”

Jacob chuckled quietly. “Would you try to kill me?” Sarcastic again, as if doubting Edward’s ability to do it.

“No.”

“Why not?” Jacob’s tone was still jeering.

“Do you really think I would hurt her that way?”

Jacob hesitated for a second, and then sighed. “Yeah, you’re right. I know that’s right. But sometimes …”

“Sometimes it’s an intriguing idea.”

Jacob pressed his face into the sleeping bag to muffle his laughter. “Exactly,” he eventually agreed.

What a strange dream this was. I wondered if it was the relentless wind that made me imagine all the whispering. Only the wind was screaming rather than whispering …

"What is it like? Losing her?" Jacob asked after a quiet moment, and there was no hint of humor in his suddenly hoarse voice. "When you thought that you'd lost her forever? How did you … cope?"

"That's very difficult for me to talk about."

Jacob waited.

"There were two different times that I thought that." Edward spoke each word just a little slower than normal. "The first time, when I thought I could leave her … that was … almost bearable. Because I thought she would forget me and it would be like I hadn't touched her life. For over six months I was able to stay away, to keep my promise that I wouldn't interfere again. It was getting close — I was fighting but I knew I wasn't going to win; I would have come back … just to check on her. That's what I would have told myself, anyway. And if I'd found her reasonably happy … I like to think that I could have gone away again.

"But she wasn't happy. And I would have stayed. That's how she convinced me to stay with her tomorrow, of course. You were wondering about that before, what could possibly motivate me … what she was feeling so needlessly guilty about. She reminded me of what it did to her when I left — what it still does to her when I leave. She feels horrible about bringing that up, but she's right. I'll never be able to make up for that, but I'll never stop trying anyway."

Jacob didn't respond for a moment, listening to the storm or digesting what he'd heard, I didn't know which.

"And the other time — when you thought she was dead?" Jacob whispered roughly.

"Yes." Edward answered a different question. "It will probably feel like that to you, won't it? The way you perceive us, you might not be able to see her as Bella anymore. But that's who she'll be."

"That's not what I asked."

Edward's voice came back fast and hard. "I can't tell you how it felt. There aren't words."

Jacob's arms flexed around me.

"But you left because you didn't want to make her a bloodsucker. You want her to be human."

Edward spoke slowly. "Jacob, from the second that I realized that I loved her, I knew there were only four possibilities. The first alternative, the best one for Bella, would be if she didn't feel as strongly for me — if she got over me and moved on. I would accept that, though it would never change the way I felt. You think of me as a … living stone — hard and cold. That's true. We are set the way we are, and it is very rare for us to experience a real change. When that happens, as when Bella entered my life, it is a permanent change. There's no going back… .

"The second alternative, the one I'd originally chosen, was to stay with her throughout her human life. It wasn't a good option for her, to waste her life with someone who couldn't be human with her, but it was the alternative I could most easily face. Knowing all along that, when she died, I would find a way to die, too. Sixty years, seventy years — it would seem like a very, very short time to me… . But then it proved much too dangerous for her to live in such close proximity with my world. It seemed like everything that could go wrong did. Or hung over us … waiting

to go wrong. I was terrified that I wouldn't get those sixty years if I stayed near her while she was human.

"So I chose option three. Which turned out to be the worst mistake of my very long life, as you know. I chose to take myself out of her world, hoping to force her into the first alternative. It didn't work, and it very nearly killed us both.

"What do I have left but the fourth option? It's what she wants — at least, she thinks she does. I've been trying to delay her, to give her time to find a reason to change her mind, but she's very ... stubborn. You know that. I'll be lucky to stretch this out a few more months. She has a horror of getting older, and her birthday is in September... ."

"I like option one," Jacob muttered.

Edward didn't respond.

"You know exactly how much I hate to accept this," Jacob whispered slowly, "but I can see that you do love her ... in your way. I can't argue with that anymore.

"Given that, I don't think you should give up on the first alternative, not yet. I think there's a very good chance that she would be okay. After time. You know, if she hadn't jumped off a cliff in March ... and if you'd waited another six months to check on her... . Well, you might have found her reasonably happy. I had a game plan."

Edward chuckled. "Maybe it would have worked. It was a well thought-out plan."

"Yeah." Jake sighed. "But ... ," suddenly he was whispering so fast the words got tangled, "give me a

year, bl — Edward. I really think I could make her happy. She's stubborn, no one knows that better than I do, but she's capable of healing. She would have healed before. And she could be human, with Charlie and Renée, and she could grow up, and have kids and … be Bella.

"You love her enough that you have to see the advantages of that plan. She thinks you're very unselfish … are you really? Can you consider the idea that I might be better for her than you are?"

"I have considered it," Edward answered quietly. "In some ways, you would be better suited for her than another human. Bella takes some looking after, and you're strong enough that you could protect her from herself, and from everything that conspires against her. You have done that already, and I'll owe you for that for as long as I live — forever — whichever comes first… .

"I even asked Alice if she could see that — see if Bella would be better off with you. She couldn't, of course. She can't see you, and then Bella's sure of her course, for now.

"But I'm not stupid enough to make the same mistake I made before, Jacob. I won't try to force her into that first option again. As long as she wants me, I'm here."

"And if she were to decide that she wanted me?" Jacob challenged. "Okay, it's a long shot, I'll give you that."

"I would let her go."

"Just like that?"

"In the sense that I'd never show her how hard it was for me, yes. But I would keep watch. You see, Jacob, you might leave her someday. Like Sam and Emily, you wouldn't have a choice. I would always be waiting in the wings, hoping for that to happen."

Jacob snorted quietly. "Well, you've been much more honest than I had any right to expect … Edward. Thanks for letting me in your head."

"As I said, I'm feeling oddly grateful for your presence in her life tonight. It was the least I could do… . You know, Jacob, if it weren't for the fact that we're natural enemies and that you're also trying to steal away the reason for my existence, I might actually like you."

"Maybe … if you weren't a disgusting vampire who was planning to suck out the life of the girl I love … well, no, not even then."

Edward chuckled.

"Can I ask you something?" Edward said after a moment.

"Why would you have to ask?"

"I can only hear if you think of it. It's just a story that Bella seemed reluctant to tell me about the other day. Something about a third wife … ?"

"What about it?"

Edward didn't answer, listening to the story in Jacob's head. I heard his low hiss in the darkness.

"What?" Jacob demanded again.

"Of course," Edward seethed. "Of course! I rather wish your elders had kept that story to themselves, Jacob."

"You don't like the leeches being painted as the bad guys?" Jacob mocked. "You know, they are. Then and now."

"I really couldn't care less about that part. Can't you guess which character Bella would identify with?"

It took Jacob a minute. "Oh. Ugh. The third wife. Okay, I see your point."

"She wants to be there in the clearing. To do what little she can, as she puts it." He sighed. "That was the secondary reason for my staying with her tomorrow. She's quite inventive when she wants something."

"You know, your military brother gave her the idea just as much as the story did."

"Neither side meant any harm," Edward whispered, peace-making now.

"And when does this little truce end?" Jacob asked. "First light? Or do we wait until after the fight?"

There was a pause as they both considered.

"First light," they whispered together, and then laughed quietly.

"Sleep well, Jacob," Edward murmured. "Enjoy the moment."

It was quiet again, and the tent held still for a few minutes. The wind seemed to have decided that it

wasn’t going to flatten us after all, and was giving up the fight.

Edward groaned softly. “I didn’t mean that quite so literally.”

“Sorry,” Jacob whispered. “You could leave, you know — give us a little privacy.”

“Would you like me to help you sleep, Jacob?” Edward offered.

“You could try,” Jacob said, unconcerned. “It would be interesting to see who walked away, wouldn’t it?”

“Don’t tempt me too far, wolf. My patience isn’t that perfect.”

Jacob whispered a laugh. “I’d rather not move just now, if you don’t mind.”

Edward started humming to himself, louder than usual — trying to drown out Jacob’s thoughts, I assumed. But it was my lullaby he hummed, and, despite my growing discomfort with this whispered dream, I sank deeper into unconsciousness ... into other dreams that made better sense... .

# Chapter 23

## MONSTER

When I woke up in the morning, it was very bright — even inside the tent, the sunlight hurt my eyes. And I was sweating, as Jacob had predicted. Jacob was snoring lightly in my ear, his arms still wrapped around me.

I pulled my head away from his feverishly warm chest and felt the sting of the cold morning on my clammy cheek. Jacob sighed in his sleep; his arms tightened unconsciously.

I squirmed, unable to loosen his hold, struggling to lift my head enough to see... .

Edward met my gaze evenly. His expression was calm, but the pain in his eyes was unconcealed.

“Is it any warmer out there?” I whispered.

“Yes. I don’t think the space heater will be necessary today.”

I tried to get to the zipper, but I couldn’t free my arms. I strained, fighting against Jacob’s inert strength. Jacob muttered, still fast asleep, his arms constricting again.

“Some help?” I asked quietly.

Edward smiled. “Did you want me to take his arms all the way off?”

“No, thank you. Just get me free. I’m going to get heat stroke.”

Edward unzipped the sleeping bag in a swift, abrupt movement. Jacob fell out, his bare back hitting the icy floor of the tent.

"Hey!" he complained, his eyes flying open. Instinctively, he flinched away from the cold, rolling onto me. I gasped as his weight knocked the breath out of me.

And then his weight was gone. I felt the impact as Jacob flew into one of the tent poles and the tent shuddered.

The growling erupted from all around. Edward was crouching in front of me, and I couldn't see his face, but the snarls were ripping angrily out of his chest. Jacob was half-crouched, too, his whole body quivering, while growls rumbled through his clenched teeth. Outside the tent, Seth Clearwater's vicious snarls echoed off the rocks.

"Stop it, stop it!" I yelled, scrambling awkwardly to put myself between them. The space was so small that I didn't have to stretch far to put one hand on each of their chests. Edward wrapped his hand around my waist, ready to yank me out of the way.

"Stop it, now," I warned him.

Under my touch, Jacob began to calm himself. The shaking slowed, but his teeth were still bared, his eyes furiously focused on Edward. Seth continued to growl, a long unbroken sound, a violent background to the sudden silence in the tent.

"Jacob?" I asked, waiting until he finally dropped his glare to look at me. "Are you hurt?"

"Of course not!" he hissed.

I turned to Edward. He was looking at me, his expression hard and angry. “That wasn’t nice. You should say sorry.”

His eyes widened in disgust. “You must be joking — he was crushing you!”

“Because you dumped him on the floor! He didn’t do it on purpose, and he didn’t hurt me.”

Edward groaned, revolted. Slowly, he looked up to glare at Jacob with hostile eyes. “My apologies, dog.”

“No harm done,” Jacob said, a taunting edge to his voice.

It was still cold, though not as cold as it had been. I curled my arms around my chest.

“Here,” Edward said, calm again. He took the parka off the floor and wrapped it over the top of my coat.

“That’s Jacob’s,” I objected.

“Jacob has a fur coat,” Edward hinted.

“I’ll just use the sleeping bag again, if you don’t mind.” Jacob ignored him, climbing around us and sliding into the down bag. “I wasn’t quite ready to wake up. That wasn’t the best night’s sleep I ever had.”

“It was your idea,” Edward said impassively.

Jacob was curled up, his eyes already closed. He yawned. “I didn’t say it wasn’t the best night I’ve ever spent. Just that I didn’t get a lot of sleep. I thought Bella was never going to shut up.”

I winced, wondering what might have come out of my mouth in my sleep. The possibilities were horrifying.

“I’m glad you enjoyed yourself,” Edward murmured.

Jacob’s dark eyes fluttered open. “Didn’t you have a nice night, then?” he asked, smug.

“It wasn’t the worst night of my life.”

“Did it make the top ten?” Jacob asked with perverse enjoyment.

“Possibly.”

Jacob smiled and closed his eyes.

“But,” Edward went on, “if I had been able to take your place last night, it would not have made the top ten of the best nights of my life. Dream about that.”

Jacob’s eyes opened into a glare. He sat up stiffly, his shoulders tense.

“You know what? I think it’s too crowded in here.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

I elbowed Edward in the ribs — probably giving myself a bruise.

“Guess I’ll catch up on my sleep later, then.” Jacob made a face. “I need to talk to Sam anyway.”

He rolled to his knees and grabbed the door’s zipper.

Pain crackled down my spine and lodged in my stomach as I abruptly realized that this could be the last time I would see him. He was going back to Sam,

back to fight the horde of bloodthirsty newborn vampires.

“Jake, wait —” I reached after him, my hand sliding down his arm.

He jerked his arm away before my fingers could find purchase.

“Please, Jake? Won’t you stay?”

“No.”

The word was hard and cold. I knew my face gave away my pain, because he exhaled and half a smile softened his expression.

“Don’t worry about me, Bells. I’ll be fine, just like I always am.” He forced a laugh. “’Sides, you think I’m going to let Seth go in my place — have all the fun and steal all the glory? Right.” He snorted.

“Be careful —”

He shoved out of the tent before I could finish.

“Give it a rest, Bella,” I heard him mutter as he re-zipped the door.

I listened for the sound of his retreating footsteps, but it was perfectly still. No more wind. I could hear morning birdsong far away on the mountain, and nothing else. Jacob moved in silence now.

I huddled in my coats, and leaned against Edward’s shoulder. We were quiet for a long time.

“How much longer?” I asked.

"Alice told Sam it should be an hour or so," Edward said, soft and bleak.

"We stay together. No matter what."

"No matter what," he agreed, his eyes tight.

"I know," I said. "I'm terrified for them, too."

"They know how to handle themselves," Edward assured me, purposely making his voice light. "I just hate missing the fun."

Again with the fun. My nostrils flared.

He put his arm around my shoulder. "Don't worry," he urged, and then he kissed my forehead.

As if there was any way to avoid that. "Sure, sure."

"Do you want me to distract you?" He breathed, running his cold fingers along my cheekbone.

I shivered involuntarily; the morning was still frosty.

"Maybe not right now," he answered himself, pulling his hand away.

"There are other ways to distract me."

"What would you like?"

"You could tell me about your ten best nights," I suggested. "I'm curious."

He laughed. "Try to guess."

I shook my head. "There're too many nights I don't know about. A century of them."

"I'll narrow it down for you. All of my best nights have happened since I met you."

"Really?"

"Yes, really — and by quite a wide margin, too."

I thought for a minute. "I can only think of mine," I admitted.

"They might be the same," he encouraged.

"Well, there was the first night. The night you stayed."

"Yes, that's one of mine, too. Of course, you were unconscious for my favorite part."

"That's right," I remembered. "I was talking that night, too."

"Yes," he agreed.

My face got hot as I wondered again what I might have said while sleeping in Jacob's arms. I couldn't remember what I'd dreamed about, or if I'd dreamed at all, so that was no help.

"What did I say last night?" I whispered more quietly than before.

He shrugged instead of answering, and I winced.

"That bad?"

"Nothing too horrible," he sighed.

"Please tell me."

"Mostly you said my name, the same as usual."

“That’s not bad,” I agreed cautiously.

“Near the end, though, you started mumbling some nonsense about ‘Jacob, my Jacob.’” I could hear the pain, even in the whisper. “Your Jacob enjoyed that quite a lot.”

I stretched my neck up, straining to reach my lips to the edge of his jaw. I couldn’t see into his eyes. He was staring up at the ceiling of the tent.

“Sorry,” I murmured. “That’s just the way I differentiate.”

“Differentiate?”

“Between Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Between the Jacob I like and the one who annoys the hell out of me,” I explained.

“That makes sense.” He sounded slightly mollified. “Tell me another favorite night.”

“Flying home from Italy.”

He frowned.

“Is that not one of yours?” I wondered.

“No, it is one of mine, actually, but I’m surprised it’s on your list. Weren’t you under the ludicrous impression I was just acting from a guilty conscience, and I was going to bolt as soon as the plane doors opened?”

“Yes.” I smiled. “But, still, you were there.”

He kissed my hair. “You love me more than I deserve.”

I laughed at the impossibility of that idea. “Next would be the night after Italy,” I continued.

“Yes, that’s on the list. You were so funny.”

“Funny?” I objected.

“I had no idea your dreams were so vivid. It took me forever to convince you that you were awake.”

“I’m still not sure,” I muttered. “You’ve always seemed more like a dream than reality. Tell me one of yours, now. Did I guess your first place?”

“No — that would be two nights ago, when you finally agreed to marry me.”

I made a face.

“That doesn’t make your list?”

I thought about the way he’d kissed me, the concession I’d gained, and changed my mind. “Yes … it does. But with reservations. I don’t understand why it’s so important to you. You already had me forever.”

“A hundred years from now, when you’ve gained enough perspective to really appreciate the answer, I will explain it to you.”

“I’ll remind you to explain — in a hundred years.”

“Are you warm enough?” he asked suddenly.

“I’m fine,” I assured him. “Why?”

Before he could answer, the silence outside the tent was ripped apart by an earsplitting howl of pain. The sound ricocheted off the bare rock face of the

mountain and filled the air so that it seared from every direction.

The howl tore through my mind like a tornado, both strange and familiar. Strange because I'd never heard such a tortured cry before. Familiar because I knew the voice at once — I recognized the sound and understood the meaning as perfectly as if I'd uttered it myself. It made no difference that Jacob was not human when he cried out. I needed no translation.

Jacob was close. Jacob had heard every word we'd said. Jacob was in agony.

The howl choked off into a peculiar gurgled sob, and then it was quiet again.

I did not hear his silent escape, but I could feel it — I could feel the absence I had wrongly assumed before, the empty space he left behind.

"Because your space heater has reached his limit," Edward answered quietly. "Truce over," he added, so low I couldn't be sure that was really what he'd said.

"Jacob was listening," I whispered. It wasn't a question.

"Yes."

"You knew."

"Yes."

I stared at nothing, seeing nothing.

"I never promised to fight fair," he reminded me quietly. "And he deserves to know."

My head fell into my hands.

“Are you angry with me?” he asked.

“Not you,” I whispered. “I’m horrified at me.”

“Don’t torment yourself,” he pleaded.

“Yes,” I agreed bitterly. “I should save my energy to torment Jacob some more. I wouldn’t want to leave any part of him unharmed.”

“He knew what he was doing.”

“Do you think that matters?” I was blinking back tears, and this was easy to hear in my voice. “Do you think I care whether it’s fair or whether he was adequately warned? I’m hurting him. Every time I turn around, I’m hurting him again.” My voice was getting louder, more hysterical. “I’m a hideous person.”

He wrapped his arms tightly around me. “No, you’re not.”

“I am! What’s wrong with me?” I struggled against his arms, and he let them drop. “I have to go find him.”

“Bella, he’s already miles away, and it’s cold.”

“I don’t care. I can’t just sit here.” I shrugged off Jacob’s parka, shoved my feet into my boots, and crawled stiffly to the door; my legs felt numb. “I have to — I have to …” I didn’t know how to finish the sentence, didn’t know what there was to do, but I unzipped the door anyway, and climbed out into the bright, icy morning.

There was less snow than I would have thought after the fury of last night's storm. Probably it had blown away rather than melted in the sun that now shone low in the southeast, glancing off the snow that lingered and stabbing at my unadjusted eyes. The air still had a bite to it, but it was dead calm and slowly becoming more seasonable as the sun rose higher.

Seth Clearwater was curled up on a patch of dry pine needles in the shadow of a thick spruce, his head on his paws. His sand-colored fur was almost invisible against the dead needles, but I could see the bright snow reflect off his open eyes. He was staring at me with what I imagined was an accusation.

I knew Edward was following me as I stumbled toward the trees. I couldn't hear him, but the sun reflected off his skin in glittering rainbows that danced ahead of me. He didn't reach out to stop me until I was several paces into the forest shadows.

His hand caught my left wrist. He ignored it when I tried to yank myself free.

"You can't go after him. Not today. It's almost time. And getting yourself lost wouldn't help anyone, regardless."

I twisted my wrist, pulling uselessly.

"I'm sorry, Bella," he whispered. "I'm sorry I did that."

"You didn't do anything. It's my fault. I did this. I did everything wrong. I could have … When he … I shouldn't have … I … I …" I was sobbing.

"Bella, Bella."

His arms folded around me, and my tears soaked into his shirt.

"I should have — told him — I should — have said —" What? What could have made this right? "He shouldn't have — found out like this."

"Do you want me to see if I can bring him back, so that you can talk to him? There's still a little time," Edward murmured, hushed agony in his voice.

I nodded into his chest, afraid to see his face.

"Stay by the tent. I'll be back soon."

His arms disappeared. He left so quickly that, in the second it took me to look up, he was already gone. I was alone.

A new sob broke from my chest. I was hurting everyone today. Was there anything I touched that didn't get spoiled?

I didn't know why it was hitting me so hard now. It wasn't like I hadn't known this was coming all along. But Jacob had never reacted so strongly — lost his bold overconfidence and shown the intensity of his pain. The sound of his agony still cut at me, somewhere deep in my chest. Right beside it was the other pain. Pain for feeling pain over Jacob. Pain for hurting Edward, too. For not being able to watch Jacob go with composure, knowing that it was the right thing, the only way.

I was selfish, I was hurtful. I tortured the ones I loved.

I was like Cathy, like Wuthering Heights, only my options were so much better than hers, neither one evil, neither one weak. And here I sat, crying about it,

not doing anything productive to make it right. Just like Cathy.

I couldn't allow what hurt me to influence my decisions anymore. It was too little, much too late, but I had to do what was right now. Maybe it was already done for me. Maybe Edward would not be able to bring him back. And then I would accept that and get on with my life. Edward would never see me shed another tear for Jacob Black. There would be no more tears. I wiped the last of them away with cold fingers now.

But if Edward did return with Jacob, that was it. I had to tell him to go away and never come back.

Why was that so hard? So very much more difficult than saying goodbye to my other friends, to Angela, to Mike? Why did that hurt? It wasn't right. That shouldn't be able to hurt me. I had what I wanted. I couldn't have them both, because Jacob could not be just my friend. It was time to give up wishing for that. How ridiculously greedy could any one person be?

I had to get over this irrational feeling that Jacob belonged in my life. He couldn't belong with me, could not be my Jacob, when I belonged to someone else.

I walked slowly back to the little clearing, my feet dragging. When I broke into the open space, blinking against the sharp light, I threw one quick glance toward Seth — he hadn't moved from his bed of pine needles — and then looked away, avoiding his eyes.

I could feel that my hair was wild, twisted into clumps like Medusa's snakes. I yanked through it with my fingers, and then gave up quickly. Who cared what I looked like, anyway?

I grabbed the canteen hanging beside the tent door and shook it. It sloshed wetly, so I unscrewed the lid and took a swig to rinse my mouth with the ice water. There was food somewhere nearby, but I didn't feel hungry enough to look for it. I started pacing across the bright little space, feeling Seth's eyes on me the whole time. Because I wouldn't look at him, in my head he became the boy again, rather than the gigantic wolf. So much like a younger Jacob.

I wanted to ask Seth to bark or give some other sign if Jacob was coming back, but I stopped myself. It didn't matter if Jacob came back. It might be easier if he didn't. I wished I had some way to call Edward.

Seth whined at that moment, and got to his feet.

"What is it?" I asked him stupidly.

He ignored me, trotting to the edge of the trees, and pointing his nose toward the west. He began whimpering.

"Is it the others, Seth?" I demanded. "In the clearing?"

He looked at me and yelped softly once, and then turned his nose alertly back to the west. His ears laid back and he whined again.

Why was I such a fool? What was I thinking, sending Edward away? How was I supposed to know what was going on? I didn't speak wolf.

A cold trickle of fear began to ooze down my spine. What if the time had run out? What if Jacob and Edward got too close? What if Edward decided to join in the fight?

The icy fear pooled in my stomach. What if Seth's distress had nothing to do with the clearing, and his yelp had been a denial? What if Jacob and Edward were fighting with each other, far away somewhere in the forest? They wouldn't do that, would they?

With sudden, chilling certainty I realized that they would — if the wrong words were said. I thought of the tense standoff in the tent this morning, and I wondered if I'd underestimated how close it had come to a fight.

It would be no more than I deserved if I somehow lost them both.

The ice locked around my heart.

Before I could collapse with fear, Seth grumbled slightly, deep in his chest, and then turned away from his watch and sauntered back toward his resting place. It calmed me, but irritated me. Couldn't he scratch a message in the dirt or something?

The pacing was starting to make me sweat under all my layers. I threw my jacket into the tent, and then I went back to wearing a path across the center of the tiny break in the trees.

Seth jumped to his feet again suddenly, the hackles on the back of his neck standing up stiffly. I looked around, but saw nothing. If Seth didn't cut it out, I was going to throw a pinecone at him.

He growled, a low warning sound, slinking back toward the western rim, and I rethought my impatience.

"It's just us, Seth," Jacob called from a distance.

I tried to explain to myself why my heart kicked into fourth gear when I heard him. It was just fear of what I was going to have to do now, that was all. I could not allow myself to be relieved that he'd come back. That would be the opposite of helpful.

Edward walked into view first, his face blank and smooth. When he stepped out from the shadows, the sun shimmered on his skin like it did on the snow. Seth went to greet him, looking intently into his eyes. Edward nodded slowly, and worry creased his forehead.

"Yes, that's all we need," he muttered to himself before addressing the big wolf. "I suppose we shouldn't be surprised. But the timing is going to be very close. Please have Sam ask Alice to try to nail the schedule down better."

Seth dipped his head once, and I wished I was able to growl. Sure, he could nod now. I turned my head, annoyed, and realized that Jacob was there.

He had his back to me, facing the way he'd come. I waited warily for him to turn around.

"Bella," Edward murmured, suddenly right beside me. He stared down at me with nothing but concern showing in his eyes. There was no end to his generosity. I deserved him now less than I ever had.

"There's a bit of a complication," he told me, his voice carefully unworried. "I'm going to take Seth a little ways away and try to straighten it out. I won't go far, but I won't listen, either. I know you don't want an audience, no matter which way you decide to go."

Only at the very end did the pain break into his voice.

I had to never hurt him again. That would be my mission in life. Never again would I be the reason for this look to come into his eyes.

I was too upset to even ask him what the new problem was. I didn't need anything else right now.

"Hurry back," I whispered.

He kissed me lightly on the lips, and then disappeared into the forest with Seth at his side.

Jacob was still in the shadow of the trees; I couldn't see his expression clearly.

"I'm in a hurry, Bella," he said in a dull voice. "Why don't you get it over with?"

I swallowed, my throat suddenly so dry I wasn't sure if I could make sound come out.

"Just say the words, and be done with it."

I took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry I'm such a rotten person," I whispered. "I'm sorry I've been so selfish. I wish I'd never met you, so I couldn't hurt you the way I have. I won't do it anymore, I promise. I'll stay far away from you. I'll move out of the state. You won't have to look at me ever again."

"That's not much of an apology," he said bitterly.

I couldn't make my voice louder than a whisper. "Tell me how to do it right."

"What if I don't want you to go away? What if I'd rather you stayed, selfish or not? Don't I get any say, if you're trying to make things up to me?"

"That won't help anything, Jake. It was wrong to stay with you when we wanted such different things. It's not going to get better. I'll just keep hurting you. I don't want to hurt you anymore. I hate it." My voice broke.

He sighed. "Stop. You don't have to say anything else. I understand."

I wanted to tell him how much I would miss him, but I bit my tongue. That would not help anything, either.

He stood quietly for a moment, staring at the ground, and I fought against the urge to go and put my arms around him. To comfort him.

And then his head snapped up.

"Well, you're not the only one capable of self-sacrifice," he said, his voice stronger. "Two can play at that game."

"What?"

"I've behaved pretty badly myself. I've made this much harder for you than I needed to. I could have given up with good grace in the beginning. But I hurt you, too."

"This is my fault."

"I won't let you claim all the blame here, Bella. Or all the glory either. I know how to redeem myself."

"What are you talking about?" I demanded. The sudden, frenzied light in his eyes frightened me.

He glanced up at the sun and then smiled at me. "There's a pretty serious fight brewing down there. I don't think it will be that difficult to take myself out of the picture."

His words sank into my brain, slowly, one by one, and I couldn't breathe. Despite all my intentions to cut Jacob out of my life completely, I didn't realize until that precise second exactly how deep the knife would have to go to do it.

"Oh, no, Jake! No, no no no," I choked out in horror. "No, Jake, no. Please, no." My knees began to tremble.

"What's the difference, Bella? This will only make it more convenient for everyone. You won't even have to move."

"No!" My voice got louder. "No, Jacob! I won't let you!"

"How will you stop me?" he taunted lightly, smiling to take the sting out of his tone.

"Jacob, I'm begging you. Stay with me." I would have fallen to my knees, if I could have moved at all.

"For fifteen minutes while I miss a good brawl? So that you can run away from me as soon as you think I'm safe again? You've got to be kidding."

"I won't run away. I've changed my mind. We'll work something out, Jacob. There's always a compromise. Don't go!"

"You're lying."

"I'm not. You know what a terrible liar I am. Look in my eyes. I'll stay if you do."

His face hardened. “And I can be your best man at the wedding?”

It was a moment before I could speak, and still the only answer I could give him was, “Please.”

“That’s what I thought,” he said, his face going calm again, but for the turbulent light in his eyes.

“I love you, Bella,” he murmured.

“I love you, Jacob,” I whispered brokenly.

He smiled. “I know that better than you do.”

He turned to walk away.

“Anything,” I called after him in a strangled voice. “Anything you want, Jacob. Just don’t do this!”

He paused, turning slowly.

“I don’t really think you mean that.”

“Stay,” I begged.

He shook his head. “No, I’m going.” He paused, as if deciding something. “But I could leave it to fate.”

“What do you mean?” I choked out.

“I don’t have to do anything deliberate — I could just do my best for my pack and let what happens happen.” He shrugged. “If you could convince me you really did want me to come back — more than you wanted to do the selfless thing.”

“How?” I asked.

"You could ask me," he suggested.

"Come back," I whispered. How could he doubt that I meant it?

He shook his head, smiling again. "That's not what I'm talking about."

It took me a second to grasp what he was saying, and all the while he was looking at me with this superior expression — so sure of my reaction. As soon as the realization hit, though, I blurted out the words without stopping to count the cost.

"Will you kiss me, Jacob?"

His eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed suspiciously. "You're bluffing."

"Kiss me, Jacob. Kiss me, and then come back."

He hesitated in the shadow, warring with himself. He half-turned again to the west, his torso twisting away from me while his feet stayed planted where they were. Still looking away, he took one uncertain step in my direction, and then another. He swung his face around to look at me, his eyes doubtful.

I stared back. I had no idea what expression was on my face.

Jacob rocked back on his heels, and then lurched forward, closing the distance between us in three long strides.

I knew he would take advantage of the situation. I expected it. I held very still — my eyes closed, my fingers curled into fists at my sides — as his hands

caught my face and his lips found mine with an eagerness that was not far from violence.

I could feel his anger as his mouth discovered my passive resistance. One hand moved to the nape of my neck, twisting into a fist around the roots of my hair. The other hand grabbed roughly at my shoulder, shaking me, then dragging me to him. His hand continued down my arm, finding my wrist and pulling my arm up around his neck. I left it there, my hand still tightly balled up, unsure how far I could go in my desperation to keep him alive. All the while his lips, disconcertingly soft and warm, tried to force a response out of mine.

As soon as he was sure I wouldn't drop my arm, he freed my wrist, his hand feeling its way down to my waist. His burning hand found the skin at the small of my back, and he yanked me forward, bowing my body against his.

His lips gave up on mine for a moment, but I knew he was nowhere close to finished. His mouth followed the line of my jaw, and then explored the length of my neck. He freed my hair, reaching for my other arm to draw it around his neck like the first.

Then both of his arms were constricted around my waist, and his lips found my ear.

"You can do better than this, Bella," he whispered huskily. "You're overthinking it."

I shivered as I felt his teeth graze my earlobe.

"That's right," he murmured. "For once, just let yourself feel what you feel."

I shook my head mechanically until one of his hands wound back into my hair and stopped me.

His voice turned acidic. “Are you sure you want me to come back? Or did you really want me to die?”

Anger rocked through me like the whiplash after a heavy punch. That was too much — he wasn’t fighting fair.

My arms were already around his neck, so I grabbed two fistfuls of his hair — ignoring the stabbing pain in my right hand — and fought back, struggling to pull my face away from his.

And Jacob misunderstood.

He was too strong to recognize that my hands, trying to yank his hair out by the roots, meant to cause him pain. Instead of anger, he imagined passion. He thought I was finally responding to him.

With a wild gasp, he brought his mouth back to mine, his fingers clutching frantically against the skin at my waist.

The jolt of anger unbalanced my tenuous hold on self-control; his unexpected, ecstatic response overthrew it entirely. If there had been only triumph, I might have been able to resist him. But the utter defenselessness of his sudden joy cracked my determination, disabled it. My brain disconnected from my body, and I was kissing him back. Against all reason, my lips were moving with his in strange, confusing ways they’d never moved before — because I didn’t have to be careful with Jacob, and he certainly wasn’t being careful with me.

My fingers tightened in his hair, but I was pulling him closer now.

He was everywhere. The piercing sunlight turned my eyelids red, and the color fit, matched the heat. The heat was everywhere. I couldn't see or hear or feel anything that wasn't Jacob.

The tiny piece of my brain that retained sanity screamed questions at me.

Why wasn't I stopping this? Worse than that, why couldn't I find in myself even the desire to want to stop? What did it mean that I didn't want him to stop? That my hands clung to his shoulders, and liked that they were wide and strong? That his hands pulled me too tight against his body, and yet it was not tight enough for me?

The questions were stupid, because I knew the answer: I'd been lying to myself.

Jacob was right. He'd been right all along. He was more than just my friend. That's why it was so impossible to tell him goodbye — because I was in love with him. Too. I loved him, much more than I should, and yet, still nowhere near enough. I was in love with him, but it was not enough to change anything; it was only enough to hurt us both more. To hurt him worse than I ever had.

I didn't care about more than that — than his pain. I more than deserved whatever pain this caused me. I hoped it was bad. I hoped I would really suffer.

In this moment, it felt as though we were the same person. His pain had always been and would always be my pain — now his joy was my joy. I felt joy, too, and yet his happiness was somehow also pain.

Almost tangible — it burned against my skin like acid, a slow torture.

For one brief, never-ending second, an entirely different path expanded behind the lids of my tear-wet eyes. As if I were looking through the filter of Jacob's thoughts, I could see exactly what I was going to give up, exactly what this new self-knowledge would not save me from losing. I could see Charlie and Renée mixed into a strange collage with Billy and Sam and La Push. I could see years passing, and meaning something as they passed, changing me. I could see the enormous red-brown wolf that I loved, always standing as protector if I needed him. For the tiniest fragment of that second, I saw the bobbing heads of two small, black-haired children, running away from me into the familiar forest. When they disappeared, they took the rest of the vision with them.

And then, quite distinctly, I felt the splintering along the fissure line in my heart as the smaller part wrenched itself away from the whole.

Jacob's lips were still before mine were. I opened my eyes and he was staring at me with wonder and elation.

"I have to leave," he whispered.

"No."

He smiled, pleased by my response. "I won't be long," he promised. "But one thing first …"

He bent to kiss me again, and there was no reason to resist. What would be the point?

This time was different. His hands were soft on my face and his warm lips were gentle, unexpectedly hesitant. It was brief, and very, very sweet.

His arms curled around me, and he hugged me securely while he whispered in my ear.

"That should have been our first kiss. Better late than never."

Against his chest, where he couldn't see, the tears welled up and spilled over.

# Chapter 24

## SNAP DECISION

I lay facedown across the sleeping bag, waiting for justice to find me. Maybe an avalanche would bury me here. I wished it would. I never wanted to have to see my face in the mirror again.

There was no sound to warn me. Out of nowhere, Edward's cold hand stroked against my knotted hair. I shuddered guiltily at his touch.

"Are you all right?" he murmured, his voice anxious.

"No. I want to die."

"That will never happen. I won't allow it."

I groaned and then whispered, "You might change your mind about that."

"Where's Jacob?"

"He went to fight," I mumbled into the floor.

Jacob had left the little camp joyfully — with a cheerful "I'll be right back" — running full tilt for the clearing, already quivering as he prepared to shift to his other self. By now the whole pack knew everything. Seth Clearwater, pacing outside the tent, was an intimate witness to my disgrace.

Edward was silent for a long moment. "Oh," he finally said.

The tone of his voice worried me that my avalanche wasn't coming fast enough. I peeked up at him and,

sure enough, his eyes were unfocused as he listened to something I'd rather die than have him hear. I dropped my face back to the floor.

It stunned me when Edward chuckled reluctantly.

"And I thought I fought dirty," he said with grudging admiration. "He makes me look like the patron saint of ethics." His hand brushed against the part of my cheek that was exposed. "I'm not mad at you, love. Jacob's more cunning than I gave him credit for. I do wish you hadn't asked him, though."

"Edward," I whispered to the rough nylon. "I … I … I'm —"

"Shh," he hushed me, his fingers soothing against my cheek. "That's not what I meant. It's just that he would have kissed you anyway — even if you hadn't fallen for it — and now I don't have an excuse to break his face. I would have really enjoyed that, too."

"Fallen for it?" I mumbled almost incomprehensibly.

"Bella, did you really believe he was that noble? That he would go out in a flame of glory just to clear the way for me?"

I raised my head slowly to meet his patient gaze. His expression was soft; his eyes were full of understanding rather than the revulsion I deserved to see.

"Yes, I did believe that," I muttered, and then looked away. But I didn't feel any anger at Jacob for tricking me. There wasn't enough room in my body to contain anything besides the hatred I felt toward myself.

Edward laughed softly again. “You’re such a bad liar, you’ll believe anyone who has the least bit of skill.”

“Why aren’t you angry with me?” I whispered. “Why don’t you hate me? Or haven’t you heard the whole story yet?”

“I think I got a fairly comprehensive look,” he said in a light, easy voice. “Jacob makes vivid mental pictures. I feel almost as bad for his pack as I do for myself. Poor Seth was getting nauseated. But Sam is making Jacob focus now.”

I closed my eyes and shook my head in agony. The sharp nylon fibers of the tent floor scraped against my skin.

“You’re only human,” he whispered, stroking my hair again.

“That’s the most miserable defense I’ve ever heard.”

“But you are human, Bella. And, as much as I might wish otherwise, so is he… . There are holes in your life that I can’t fill. I understand that.”

“But that’s not true. That’s what makes me so horrible. There are no holes.”

“You love him,” he murmured gently.

Every cell in my body ached to deny it.

“I love you more,” I said. It was the best I could do.

“Yes, I know that, too. But … when I left you, Bella, I left you bleeding. Jacob was the one to stitch you back up again. That was bound to leave its mark — on both of you. I’m not sure those kinds of stitches

dissolve on their own. I can't blame either of you for something I made necessary. I may gain forgiveness, but that doesn't let me escape the consequences."

"I should have known you'd find some way to blame yourself. Please stop. I can't stand it."

"What would you like me to say?"

"I want you to call me every bad name you can think of, in every language you know. I want you to tell me that you're disgusted with me and that you're going to leave so that I can beg and grovel on my knees for you to stay."

"I'm sorry." He sighed. "I can't do that."

"At least stop trying to make me feel better. Let me suffer. I deserve it."

"No," he murmured.

I nodded slowly. "You're right. Keep on being too understanding. That's probably worse."

He was silent for a moment, and I sensed a charge in the atmosphere, a new urgency.

"It's getting close," I stated.

"Yes, a few more minutes now. Just enough time to say one more thing… ."

I waited. When he finally spoke again, he was whispering. "I can be noble, Bella. I'm not going to make you choose between us. Just be happy, and you can have whatever part of me you want, or none at all, if that's better. Don't let any debt you feel you owe me influence your decision."

I pushed off the floor, shoving myself up onto my knees.

"Dammit, stop that!" I shouted at him.

His eyes widened in surprise. "No — you don't understand. I'm not just trying to make you feel better, Bella, I really mean it."

"I know you do," I groaned. "What happened to fighting back? Don't start with the noble self-sacrifice now! Fight!"

"How?" he asked, and his eyes were ancient with their sadness.

I scrambled into his lap, throwing my arms around him.

"I don't care that it's cold here. I don't care that I stink like a dog right now. Make me forget how awful I am. Make me forget him. Make me forget my own name. Fight back!"

I didn't wait for him to decide — or to have the chance to tell me he wasn't interested in a cruel, faithless monster like me. I pulled myself against him and crushed my mouth to his snow-cold lips.

"Careful, love," he murmured under my urgent kiss.

"No," I growled.

He gently pushed my face a few inches back. "You don't have to prove anything to me."

"I'm not trying to prove something. You said I could have any part of you I wanted. I want this part. I want every part." I wrapped my arms around his neck and

strained to reach his lips. He bent his head to kiss me back, but his cool mouth was hesitant as my impatience grew more pronounced. My body was making my intentions clear, giving me away. Inevitably, his hands moved to restrain me.

"Perhaps this isn't the best moment for that," he suggested, too calm for my liking.

"Why not?" I grumbled. There was no point in fighting if he was going to be rational; I dropped my arms.

"Firstly, because it is cold." He reached out to pull the sleeping bag off the floor; he wrapped it around me like a blanket.

"Wrong," I said. "First, because you are bizarrely moral for a vampire."

He chuckled. "All right, I'll give you that. The cold is second. And thirdly ... well, you do actually stink, love."

He wrinkled his nose.

I sighed.

"Fourthly," he murmured, dropping his face so that he was whispering in my ear. "We will try, Bella. I'll make good on my promise. But I'd much rather it wasn't in reaction to Jacob Black."

I cringed, and buried my face against his shoulder.

"And fifthly ..."

"This is a very long list," I muttered.

He laughed. “Yes, but did you want to listen to the fight or not?”

As he spoke, Seth howled stridently outside the tent.

My body stiffened to the sound. I didn’t realize my left hand was clenched into a fist, nails biting into my bandaged palm, until Edward took it and gently smoothed my fingers out.

“It’s going to be fine, Bella,” he promised. “We’ve got skill, training, and surprise on our side. It will be over very soon. If I didn’t truly believe that, I would be down there now — and you’d be here, chained to a tree or something along those lines.”

“Alice is so small,” I moaned.

He chuckled. “That might be a problem … if it were possible for someone to catch her.”

Seth started to whimper.

“What’s wrong?” I demanded.

“He’s just angry that he’s stuck here with us. He knows the pack kept him out of the action to protect him. He’s salivating to join them.”

I scowled in Seth’s general direction.

“The newborns have reached the end of the trail — it worked like a charm, Jasper’s a genius — and they’ve caught the scent of the ones in the meadow, so they’re splitting into two groups now, as Alice said,” Edward murmured, his eyes focused on something far away. “Sam’s taking us around to head off the ambush party.” He was so intent on what he was hearing that he used the pack plural.

Suddenly he looked down at me. “Breathe, Bella.”

I struggled to do what he asked. I could hear Seth’s heavy panting just outside the tent wall, and I tried to keep my lungs on the same even pace, so that I wouldn’t hyperventilate.

“The first group is in the clearing. We can hear the fighting.”

My teeth locked together.

He laughed once. “We can hear Emmett — he’s enjoying himself.”

I made myself take another breath with Seth.

“The second group is getting ready — they aren’t paying attention, they haven’t heard us yet.”

Edward growled.

“What?” I gasped.

“They’re talking about you.” His teeth clenched together. “They’re supposed to make sure you don’t escape… . Nice move, Leah! Mmm, she’s quite fast,” he murmured in approval. “One of the newborns caught our scent, and Leah took him down before he could even turn. Sam’s helping her finish him off. Paul and Jacob got another one, but the others are on the defensive now. They have no idea what to make of us. Both sides are feinting… . No, let Sam lead. Stay out of the way,” he muttered. “Separate them — don’t let them protect each other’s backs.”

Seth whined.

"That's better, drive them toward the clearing," Edward approved. His body was shifting unconsciously as he watched, tensing for moves he would have made. His hands still held mine; I twisted my fingers through his. At least he wasn't down there.

The sudden absence of sound was the only warning.

The deep rush of Seth's breathing cut off, and — as I'd paced my breaths with his — I noticed.

I stopped breathing, too — too frightened to even make my lungs work as I realized that Edward had frozen into a block of ice beside me.

Oh, no. No. No.

Who had been lost? Theirs or ours? Mine, all mine. What was my loss?

So quickly that I wasn't exactly sure how it happened, I was on my feet and the tent was collapsing in ragged shreds around me. Had Edward ripped our way out? Why?

I blinked, shocked, into the brilliant light. Seth was all I could see, right beside us, his face only six inches from Edward's. They stared at each other with absolute concentration for one infinite second. The sun shattered off Edward's skin and sent sparkles dancing across Seth's fur.

And then Edward whispered urgently, "Go, Seth!"

The huge wolf wheeled and disappeared into the forest shadows.

Had two entire seconds passed? It felt like hours. I was terrified to the point of nausea by the knowledge

that something horrible had gone awry in the clearing. I opened my mouth to demand that Edward take me there, and do it now. They needed him, and they needed me. If I had to bleed to save them, I would do it. I would die to do it, like the third wife. I had no silver dagger in my hand, but I would find a way —

Before I could get the first syllable out, I felt as if I was being flung through the air. But Edward's hands never let go of me — I was only being moved, so quickly that the sensation was like falling sideways.

I found myself with my back pressed against the sheer cliff face. Edward stood in front of me, holding a posture that I knew at once.

Relief washed through my mind at the same time that my stomach dropped through the soles of my feet.

I'd misunderstood.

Relief — nothing had gone wrong in the clearing.

Horror — the crisis was here.

Edward held a defensive position — half-crouched, his arms extended slightly — that I recognized with sickening certainty. The rock at my back could have been the ancient brick walls of the Italian alley where he had stood between me and the black-cloaked Volturi warriors.

Something was coming for us.

"Who?" I whispered.

The words came through his teeth in a snarl that was louder than I expected. Too loud. It meant that it was

far too late to hide. We were trapped, and it didn't matter who heard his answer.

"Victoria," he said, spitting the word, making it a curse. "She's not alone. She crossed my scent, following the newborns in to watch — she never meant to fight with them. She made a spur-of-the-moment decision to find me, guessing that you would be wherever I was. She was right. You were right. It was always Victoria."

She was close enough that he could hear her thoughts.

Relief again. If it had been the Volturi, we were both dead. But with Victoria, it didn't have to be both. Edward could survive this. He was a good fighter, as good as Jasper. If she didn't bring too many others, he could fight his way out, back to his family. Edward was faster than anyone. He could make it.

I was so glad he'd sent Seth away. Of course, there was no one Seth could run to for help. Victoria had timed her decision perfectly. But at least Seth was safe; I couldn't see the huge sandy wolf in my head when I thought his name — just the gangly fifteen-year-old boy.

Edward's body shifted — only infinitesimally, but it told me where to look. I stared at the black shadows of the forest.

It was like having my nightmares walk forward to greet me.

Two vampires edged slowly into the small opening of our camp, eyes intent, missing nothing. They glistened like diamonds in the sun.

I could barely look at the blond boy — yes, he was just a boy, though he was muscular and tall, maybe my age when he was changed. His eyes — a more vivid red than I had ever seen before — could not hold mine. Though he was closest to Edward, the nearest danger, I could not watch him.

Because, a few feet to the side and a few feet back, Victoria was staring at me.

Her orange hair was brighter than I'd remembered, more like a flame. There was no wind here, but the fire around her face seemed to shimmer slightly, as if it were alive.

Her eyes were black with thirst. She did not smile, as she always had in my nightmares — her lips were pressed into a tight line. There was a striking feline quality to the way she held her coiled body, a lioness waiting for an opening to spring. Her restless, wild gaze flickered between Edward and me, but never rested on him for more than a half-second. She could not keep her eyes from my face any more than I could keep mine from hers.

Tension rolled off of her, nearly visible in the air. I could feel the desire, the all-consuming passion that held her in its grip. Almost as if I could hear her thoughts, too, I knew what she was thinking.

She was so close to what she wanted — the focus of her whole existence for more than a year now was just so close.

My death.

Her plan was as obvious as it was practical. The big blond boy would attack Edward. As soon as Edward was sufficiently distracted, Victoria would finish me.

It would be quick — she had no time for games here — but it would be thorough. Something that it would be impossible to recover from. Something that even vampire venom could not repair.

She'd have to stop my heart. Perhaps a hand shoved through my chest, crushing it. Something along those lines.

My heart beat furiously, loudly, as if to make her target more obvious.

An immense distance away, from far across the black forest, a wolf's howl echoed in the still air. With Seth gone, there was no way to interpret the sound.

The blond boy looked at Victoria from the corner of his eye, waiting on her command.

He was young in more ways than one. I guessed from his brilliant crimson irises that he couldn't have been a vampire for very long. He would be strong, but inept. Edward would know how to fight him. Edward would survive.

Victoria jerked her chin toward Edward, wordlessly ordering the boy forward.

"Riley," Edward said in a soft, pleading voice.

The blond boy froze, his red eyes widening.

"She's lying to you, Riley," Edward told him. "Listen to me. She's lying to you just like she lied to the others who are dying now in the clearing. You know that she's lied to them, that she had you lie to them, that neither of you were ever going to help them. Is it so hard to believe that she's lied to you, too?"

Confusion swept across Riley's face.

Edward shifted a few inches to the side, and Riley automatically compensated with an adjustment of his own.

"She doesn't love you, Riley." Edward's soft voice was compelling, almost hypnotic. "She never has. She loved someone named James, and you're no more than a tool to her."

When he said James's name, Victoria's lips pulled back in a teeth-baring grimace. Her eyes stayed locked on me.

Riley cast a frantic glance in her direction.

"Riley?" Edward said.

Riley automatically refocused on Edward.

"She knows that I will kill you, Riley. She wants you to die so that she doesn't have to keep up the pretense anymore. Yes — you've seen that, haven't you? You've read the reluctance in her eyes, suspected a false note in her promises. You were right. She's never wanted you. Every kiss, every touch was a lie."

Edward moved again, moved a few inches toward the boy, a few inches away from me.

Victoria's gaze zeroed in on the gap between us. It would take her less than a second to kill me — she only needed the tiniest margin of opportunity.

Slower this time, Riley repositioned himself.

“You don’t have to die,” Edward promised, his eyes holding the boy’s. “There are other ways to live than the way she’s shown you. It’s not all lies and blood, Riley. You can walk away right now. You don’t have to die for her lies.”

Edward slid his feet forward and to the side. There was a foot of space between us now. Riley circled too far, overcompensating this time. Victoria leaned forward onto the balls of her feet.

“Last chance, Riley,” Edward whispered.

Riley’s face was desperate as he looked to Victoria for answers.

“He’s the liar, Riley,” Victoria said, and my mouth fell open in shock at the sound of her voice. “I told you about their mind tricks. You know I love only you.”

Her voice was not the strong, wild, catlike growl I would have put with her face and stance. It was soft, it was high — a babyish, soprano tinkling. The kind of voice that went with blond curls and pink bubble gum. It made no sense coming through her bared, glistening teeth.

Riley’s jaw tightened, and he squared his shoulders. His eyes emptied — there was no more confusion, no more suspicion. There was no thought at all. He tensed himself to attack.

Victoria’s body seemed to be trembling, she was so tightly wound. Her fingers were ready claws, waiting for Edward to move just one more inch away from me.

The snarl came from none of them.

A mammoth tan shape flew through the center of the opening, throwing Riley to the ground.

“No!” Victoria cried, her baby voice shrill with disbelief.

A yard and a half in front of me, the huge wolf ripped and tore at the blond vampire beneath him. Something white and hard smacked into the rocks by my feet. I cringed away from it.

Victoria did not spare one glance for the boy she’d just pledged her love to. Her eyes were still on me, filled with a disappointment so ferocious that she looked deranged.

“No,” she said again, through her teeth, as Edward started to move toward her, blocking her path to me.

Riley was on his feet again, looking misshapen and haggard, but he was able to fling a vicious kick into Seth’s shoulder. I heard the bone crunch. Seth backed off and started to circle, limping. Riley had his arms out, ready, though he seemed to be missing part of one hand… .

Only a few yards away from that fight, Edward and Victoria were dancing.

Not quite circling, because Edward was not allowing her to position herself closer to me. She sashayed back, moving from side to side, trying to find a hole in his defense. He shadowed her footwork lithely, stalking her with perfect concentration. He began to move just a fraction of a second before she moved, reading her intentions in her thoughts.

Seth lunged at Riley from the side, and something tore with a hideous, grating screech. Another heavy

white chunk flew into the forest with a thud. Riley roared in fury, and Seth skipped back — amazingly light on his feet for his size — as Riley took a swipe at him with one mangled hand.

Victoria was weaving through the tree trunks at the far end of the little opening now. She was torn, her feet pulling her toward safety while her eyes yearned toward me as if I were a magnet, reeling her in. I could see the burning desire to kill warring with her survival instinct.

Edward could see that, too.

“Don’t go, Victoria,” he murmured in that same hypnotic tone as before. “You’ll never get another chance like this.”

She showed her teeth and hissed at him, but she seemed unable to move farther away from me.

“You can always run later,” Edward purred. “Plenty of time for that. It’s what you do, isn’t it? It’s why James kept you around. Useful, if you like to play deadly games. A partner with an uncanny instinct for escaping. He shouldn’t have left you — he could have used your skills when we caught up to him in Phoenix.”

A snarl ripped from between her lips.

“That’s all you ever were to him, though. Silly to waste so much energy avenging someone who had less affection for you than a hunter for his mount. You were never more than a convenience to him. I would know.”

Edward’s lips pulled up on one side as he tapped his temple.

With a strangled screech, Victoria darted out of the trees again, feinting to the side. Edward responded, and the dance began again.

Just then, Riley's fist caught Seth's flank, and a low yelp coughed out of Seth's throat. Seth backed away, his shoulders twitching as if he were trying to shake off the pain.

Please, I wanted to plead with Riley, but I couldn't find the muscles to make my mouth open, to pull the air up from my lungs. Please, he's just a child!

Why hadn't Seth run away? Why didn't he run now?

Riley was closing the distance between them again, driving Seth toward the cliff face beside me. Victoria was suddenly interested in her partner's fate. I could see her, from the corner of her eyes, judge the distance between Riley and me. Seth snapped at Riley, forcing him back again, and Victoria hissed.

Seth wasn't limping anymore. His circling took him within inches of Edward; his tail brushed Edward's back, and Victoria's eyes bulged.

"No, he won't turn on me," Edward said, answering the question in Victoria's head. He used her distraction to slide closer. "You provided us with a common enemy. You allied us."

She clenched her teeth, trying to keep her focus on Edward alone.

"Look more closely, Victoria," he murmured, pulling at the threads of her concentration. "Is he really so much like the monster James tracked across Siberia?"

Her eyes popped wide open, and then began flickering wildly from Edward to Seth to me, around and around. “Not the same?” she snarled in her little girl’s soprano. “Impossible!”

“Nothing is impossible,” Edward murmured, voice velvet soft as he moved another inch closer to her. “Except what you want. You’ll never touch her.”

She shook her head, fast and jerky, fighting his diversions, and tried to duck around him, but he was in place to block her as soon as she’d thought of the plan. Her face contorted in frustration, and then she shifted lower into her crouch, a lioness again, and stalked deliberately forward.

Victoria was no inexperienced, instinct-driven newborn. She was lethal. Even I could tell the difference between her and Riley, and I knew that Seth wouldn’t have lasted so long if he’d been fighting this vampire.

Edward shifted, too, as they closed on each other, and it was lion versus lioness.

The dance increased in tempo.

It was like Alice and Jasper in the meadow, a blurred spiraling of movement, only this dance was not as perfectly choreographed. Sharp crunches and crackings reverberated off the cliff face whenever someone slipped in their formation. But they were moving too fast for me to see who was making the mistakes… .

Riley was distracted by the violent ballet, his eyes anxious for his partner. Seth struck, crunching off another small piece of the vampire. Riley bellowed and launched a massive backhanded blow that

caught Seth full in his broad chest. Seth's huge body soared ten feet and crashed into the rocky wall over my head with a force that seemed to shake the whole peak. I heard the breath whoosh from his lungs, and I ducked out of the way as he rebounded off the stone and collapsed on the ground a few feet in front of me.

A low whimper escaped through Seth's teeth.

Sharp fragments of gray stone showered down on my head, scratching my exposed skin. A jagged spike of rock rolled down my right arm and I caught it reflexively. My fingers clenched around the long shard as my own survival instincts kicked in; since there was no chance of flight, my body — not caring how ineffectual the gesture was — prepared for a fight.

Adrenaline jolted through my veins. I knew the brace was cutting into my palm. I knew the crack in my knuckle was protesting. I knew it, but I could not feel the pain.

Behind Riley, all I could see was the twisting flame of Victoria's hair and a blur of white. The increasingly frequent metallic snaps and tears, the gasps and shocked hissings, made it clear that the dance was turning deadly for someone.

But which someone?

Riley lurched toward me, his red eyes brilliant with fury. He glared at the limp mountain of sand-colored fur between us, and his hands — mangled, broken hands — curled into talons. His mouth opened, widened, his teeth glistening, as he prepared to rip out Seth's throat.

A second kick of adrenaline hit like an electric shock, and everything was suddenly very clear.

Both fights were too close. Seth was about to lose his, and I had no idea if Edward was winning or losing. They needed help. A distraction. Something to give them an edge.

My hand gripped the stone spike so tightly that a support in the brace snapped.

Was I strong enough? Was I brave enough? How hard could I shove the rough stone into my body? Would this buy Seth enough time to get back on his feet? Would he heal fast enough for my sacrifice to do him any good?

I raked the point of the shard up my arm, yanking my thick sweater back to expose the skin, and then pressed the sharp tip to the crease at my elbow. I already had a long scar there from my last birthday. That night, my flowing blood had been enough to catch every vampire's attention, to freeze them all in place for an instant. I prayed it would work that way again. I steeled myself and sucked in one deep breath.

Victoria was distracted by the sound of my gasp. Her eyes, holding still for one tiny portion of a second, met mine. Fury and curiosity mingled strangely in her expression.

I wasn't sure how I heard the low sound with all the other noises echoing off the stone wall and hammering inside my head. My own heartbeat should have been enough to drown it out. But, in the split second that I stared into Victoria's eyes, I thought I heard a familiar, exasperated sigh.

In that same short second, the dance broke violently apart. It happened so quickly that it was over before I could follow the sequence of events. I tried to catch up in my head.

Victoria had flown out of the blurred formation and smashed into a tall spruce about halfway up the tree. She dropped back to the earth already crouched to spring.

Simultaneously, Edward — all but invisible with speed — had twisted backward and caught the unsuspecting Riley by the arm. It had looked like Edward planted his foot against Riley's back, and heaved —

The little campsite was filled with Riley's piercing shriek of agony.

At the same time, Seth leaped to his feet, cutting off most of my view.

But I could still see Victoria. And, though she looked oddly deformed — as if she were unable to straighten up completely — I could see the smile I'd been dreaming of flash across her wild face.

She coiled and sprang.

Something small and white whistled through the air and collided with her mid-flight. The impact sounded like an explosion, and it threw her against another tree — this one snapped in half. She landed on her feet again, crouched and ready, but Edward was already in place. Relief swelled in my heart when I saw that he stood straight and perfect.

Victoria kicked something aside with a flick of her bare foot — the missile that had crippled her attack. It rolled toward me, and I realized what it was.

My stomach lurched.

The fingers were still twitching; grasping at blades of grass, Riley's arm began to drag itself mindlessly across the ground.

Seth was circling Riley again, and now Riley was retreating. He backed away from the advancing werewolf, his face rigid with pain. He raised his one arm defensively.

Seth rushed Riley, and the vampire was clearly off-balance. I saw Seth sink his teeth into Riley's shoulder and tear, jumping back again.

With an earsplitting metallic screech, Riley lost his other arm.

Seth shook his head, flinging the arm into the woods. The broken hissing noise that came through Seth's teeth sounded like snickering.

Riley screamed out a tortured plea. "Victoria!"

Victoria did not even flinch to the sound of her name. Her eyes did not flicker once toward her partner.

Seth launched himself forward with the force of a wrecking ball. The thrust carried both Seth and Riley into the trees, where the metallic screeching was matched by Riley's screams. Screams that abruptly cut off, while the sounds of rock being ripped to shreds continued.

Though she spared Riley no farewell glance, Victoria seemed to realize that she was on her own. She began to back away from Edward, frenzied disappointment blazing in her eyes. She threw me one short, agonized stare of longing, and then she started to retreat faster.

"No," Edward crooned, his voice seductive. "Stay just a little longer."

She wheeled and flew toward the refuge of the forest like an arrow from a bow.

But Edward was faster — a bullet from a gun.

He caught her unprotected back at the edge of the trees and, with one last, simple step, the dance was over.

Edward's mouth brushed once across her neck, like a caress. The squealing clamor coming from Seth's efforts covered every other noise, so there was no discernible sound to make the image one of violence. He could have been kissing her.

And then the fiery tangle of hair was no longer connected to the rest of her body. The shivering orange waves fell to the ground, and bounced once before rolling toward the trees.

# Chapter 25
## MIRROR

I forced my eyes — frozen wide open with shock — to move, so that I could not examine too closely the oval object wrapped in tendrils of shivering, fiery hair.

Edward was in motion again. Swift and coolly businesslike, he dismembered the headless corpse.

I could not go to him — I could not make my feet respond; they were bolted to the stone beneath them. But I scrutinized his every action minutely, looking for any evidence that he had been harmed. My heart slowed to a healthier rhythm when I found nothing. He was lithe and graceful as ever. I couldn't even see a tear in his clothes.

He did not look at me — where I stood frozen to the cliff wall, horrified — while he piled the quivering, twitching limbs and then covered them with dry pine needles. He still did not meet my shocked gaze as he darted into the forest after Seth.

I didn't have time to recover before both he and Seth were back, Edward with his arms full of Riley. Seth was carrying a large chunk — the torso — in his mouth. They added their burden to the pile, and Edward pulled a silver rectangle from his pocket. He flipped open the butane lighter and held the flame to the dry tinder. It caught at once; long tongues of orange fire licked rapidly across the pyre.

"Get every piece," Edward said in a low aside to Seth.

Together, the vampire and the werewolf scoured the campsite, occasionally tossing small lumps of white

stone into the blaze. Seth handled the pieces with his teeth. My brain wasn't working well enough for me to understand why he didn't change back to a form with hands.

Edward kept his eyes on his work.

And then they were done, and the raging fire was sending a pillar of choking purple toward the sky. The thick smoke curled up slowly, looking more solid than it should; it smelled like burning incense, and the scent was uncomfortable. It was heavy, too strong.

Seth made that snickering sound again, deep in his chest.

A smile flickered across Edward's tense face.

Edward stretched out his arm, his hand curled into a fist. Seth grinned, revealing the long row of dagger teeth, and bumped his nose against Edward's hand.

"Nice teamwork," Edward murmured.

Seth coughed a laugh.

Then Edward took a deep breath, and turned slowly to face me.

I did not understand his expression. His eyes were as wary as if I were another enemy — more than wary, they were afraid. Yet he'd shown no fear at all when he'd faced Victoria and Riley… . My mind was stuck, stunned and useless as my body. I stared at him, bewildered.

"Bella, love," he said in his softest tone, walking toward me with exaggerated slowness, his hands held up, palms forward. Dazed as I was, it reminded me

oddly of a suspect approaching a policeman, showing that he wasn't armed... .

"Bella, can you drop the rock, please? Carefully. Don't hurt yourself."

I'd forgotten all about my crude weapon, though I realized now that I was grasping it so hard that my knuckle was screaming in protest. Was it rebroken? Carlisle would put me in a cast for sure this time.

Edward hesitated a few feet from me, his hands still in the air, his eyes still fearful.

It took me a few long seconds to remember how to move my fingers. Then the rock clattered to the ground, while my hand stayed frozen in the same position.

Edward relaxed slightly when my hands were empty, but came no closer.

"You don't have to be afraid, Bella," Edward murmured. "You're safe. I won't hurt you."

The mystifying promise only confused me further. I stared at him like an imbecile, trying to understand.

"It's going to be all right, Bella. I know you're frightened now, but it's over. No one is going to hurt you. I won't touch you. I won't hurt you," he said again.

My eyes blinked furiously, and I found my voice. "Why do you keep saying that?"

I took an unsteady step toward him, and he leaned away from my advance.

"What's wrong?" I whispered. "What do you mean?"

"Are you ..." His golden eyes were suddenly as confused as I felt. "Aren't you afraid of me?"

"Afraid of you? Why?"

I staggered forward another step, and then tripped over something — my own feet probably. Edward caught me, and I buried my face in his chest and started to sob.

"Bella, Bella, I'm so sorry. It's over, it's over."

"I'm fine," I gasped. "I'm okay. I'm just. Freaking out. Give me. A minute."

His arms tightened around me. "I'm so sorry," he murmured again and again.

I clung to him until I could breathe, and then I was kissing him — his chest, his shoulder, his neck — every part of him that I could reach. Slowly, my brain started to work again.

"Are you okay?" I demanded between kisses. "Did she hurt you at all?"

"I am absolutely fine," he promised, burying his face in my hair.

"Seth?"

Edward chuckled. "More than fine. Very pleased with himself, in fact."

"The others? Alice, Esme? The wolves?

“All fine. It’s over there, too. It went just as smoothly as I promised. We got the worst of it here.”

I let myself absorb that for a moment, let it sink in and settle in my head.

My family and my friends were safe. Victoria was never coming after me again. It was over.

We were all going to be fine.

But I couldn’t completely take in the good news while I was still so confused.

“Tell me why,” I insisted. “Why did you think I would be afraid of you?”

“I’m sorry,” he said, apologizing yet again — for what? I had no idea. “So sorry. I didn’t want you to see that. See me like that. I know I must have terrified you.”

I had to think about that for another minute, about the hesitant way he’d approached me, his hands in the air. Like I was going to run if he moved too fast… .

“Seriously?” I finally asked. “You … what? Thought you’d scared me off?” I snorted. Snorting was good; a voice couldn’t tremble or break during a snort. It sounded impressively offhand.

He put his hand under my chin and tilted my head back to read my face.

“Bella, I just” — he hesitated and then forced the words out — “I just beheaded and dismembered a sentient creature not twenty yards from you. That doesn’t bother you?”

He frowned at me.

I shrugged. Shrugging was good, too. Very blasé. "Not really. I was only afraid that you and Seth were going to get hurt. I wanted to help, but there's only so much I can do… ."

His suddenly livid expression made my voice fade out.

"Yes," he said, his tone clipped. "Your little stunt with the rock. You know that you nearly gave me a heart attack? Not the easiest thing to do, that."

His furious glower made it hard to answer.

"I wanted to help … Seth was hurt… ."

"Seth was only feigning that he was hurt, Bella. It was a trick. And then you … !" He shook his head, unable to finish. "Seth couldn't see what you were doing, so I had to step in. Seth's a bit disgruntled that he can't claim a single-handed defeat now."

"Seth was … faking?"

Edward nodded sternly.

"Oh."

We both looked at Seth, who was studiously ignoring us, watching the flames. Smugness radiated from every hair in his fur.

"Well, I didn't know that," I said, on the offense now. "And it's not easy being the only helpless person around. Just you wait till I'm a vampire! I'm not going to be sitting on the sidelines next time."

A dozen emotions flitted across his face before he settled on being amused. "Next time? Did you anticipate another war soon?"

"With my luck? Who knows?"

He rolled his eyes, but I could see that he was flying — the relief was making us both lightheaded. It was over.

Or ... was it?

"Hold on. Didn't you say something before — ?" I flinched, remembering what exactly it had been before — what was I going to say to Jacob? My splintered heart throbbed out a painful, aching beat. It was hard to believe, almost impossible, but the hardest part of this day was not behind me — and then I soldiered on. "About a complication? And Alice, needing to nail down the schedule for Sam. You said it was going to be close. What was going to be close?"

Edward's eyes flickered back to Seth, and they exchanged a loaded glance.

"Well?" I asked.

"It's nothing, really," Edward said quickly. "But we do need to be on our way... ."

He started to pull me into place on his back, but I stiffened and drew away.

"Define nothing."

Edward took my face between his palms. "We only have a minute, so don't panic, all right? I told you that you had no reason to be afraid. Trust me on that, please?"

I nodded, trying to hide the sudden terror — how much more could I handle before I collapsed? "No reason to be afraid. Got it."

He pursed his lips for a second, deciding what to say. And then he glanced abruptly at Seth, as if the wolf had called him.

“What’s she doing?” Edward asked.

Seth whined; it was an anxious, uneasy sound. It made the hair on the back of my neck rise.

Everything was dead silent for one endless second.

And then Edward gasped, “No!” and one of his hands flew out as if to grab something that I couldn’t see. “Don’t —!”

A spasm rocked through Seth’s body, and a howl, blistering with agony, ripped from his lungs.

Edward fell to his knees at the exact same moment, gripping the sides of his head with two hands, his face furrowed in pain.

I screamed once in bewildered terror, and dropped to my knees beside him. Stupidly, I tried to pull his hands from his face; my palms, clammy with sweat, slid off his marble skin.

“Edward! Edward!”

His eyes focused on me; with obvious effort, he pulled his clenched teeth apart.

“It’s okay. We’re going to be fine. It’s —” He broke off, and winced again.

“What’s happening?” I cried out while Seth howled in anguish.

“We’re fine. We’re going to be okay,” Edward gasped. “Sam — help him —”

And I realized in that instant, when he said Sam’s name, that he was not speaking of himself and Seth. No unseen force was attacking them. This time, the crisis was not here.

He was using the pack plural.

I’d burned through all my adrenaline. My body had nothing left. I sagged, and Edward caught me before I could hit the rocks. He sprang to his feet, me in his arms.

“Seth!” Edward shouted.

Seth was crouched, still tensed in agony, looking as if he meant to launch himself into the forest.

“No!” Edward ordered. “You go straight home. Now. As fast as you can!”

Seth whimpered, shaking his great head from side to side.

“Seth. Trust me.”

The huge wolf stared into Edward’s agonized eyes for one long second, and then he straightened up and flew into the trees, disappearing like a ghost.

Edward cradled me tightly against his chest, and then we were also hurtling through the shadowy forest, taking a different path than the wolf.

“Edward.” I fought to force the words through my constricted throat. “What happened, Edward? What

happened to Sam? Where are we going? What's happening?"

"We have to go back to the clearing," he told me in a low voice. "We knew there was a good probability of this happening. Earlier this morning, Alice saw it and passed it through Sam to Seth. The Volturi decided it was time to intercede."

The Volturi.

Too much. My mind refused to make sense of the words, pretended it couldn't understand.

The trees jolted past us. He was running downhill so fast that it felt as if we were plummeting, falling out of control.

"Don't panic. They aren't coming for us. It's just the normal contingent of the guard that usually cleans up this kind of mess. Nothing momentous, they're merely doing their job. Of course, they seem to have timed their arrival very carefully. Which leads me to believe that no one in Italy would mourn if these newborns had reduced the size of the Cullen family." The words came through his teeth, hard and bleak. "I'll know for sure what they were thinking when they get to the clearing."

"Is that why we're going back?" I whispered. Could I handle this? Images of flowing black robes crept into my unwilling mind, and I flinched away from them. I was close to a breaking point.

"It's part of the reason. Mostly, it will be safer for us to present a united front at this point. They have no reason to harass us, but ... Jane's with them. If she thought we were alone somewhere away from the others, it might tempt her. Like Victoria, Jane will

probably guess that I'm with you. Demetri, of course, is with her. He could find me, if Jane asked him to."

I didn't want to think that name. I didn't want to see that blindingly exquisite, childlike face in my head. A strange sound came out of my throat.

"Shh, Bella, shh. It's all going to be fine. Alice can see that."

Alice could see? But … then where were the wolves? Where was the pack?

"The pack?"

"They had to leave quickly. The Volturi do not honor truces with werewolves."

I could hear my breathing get faster, but I couldn't control it. I started to gasp.

"I swear they will be fine," Edward promised me. "The Volturi won't recognize the scent — they won't realize the wolves are here; this isn't a species they are familiar with. The pack will be fine."

I couldn't process his explanation. My concentration was ripped to shreds by my fears. We're going to be fine, he had said before … and Seth, howling in agony … Edward had avoided my first question, distracted me with the Volturi… .

I was very close to the edge — just clinging by my fingertips.

The trees were a racing blur that flowed around him like jade waters.

“What happened?” I whispered again. “Before. When Seth was howling? When you were hurt?”

Edward hesitated.

“Edward! Tell me!”

“It was all over,” he whispered. I could barely hear him over the wind his speed created. “The wolves didn’t count their half … they thought they had them all. Of course, Alice couldn’t see… .”

“What happened?!”

“One of the newborns was hiding… . Leah found him — she was being stupid, cocky, trying to prove something. She engaged him alone… .”

“Leah,” I repeated, and I was too weak to feel shame for the relief that flooded through me. “Is she going to be okay?”

“Leah wasn’t hurt,” Edward mumbled.

I stared at him for a long second.

Sam — help him — Edward had gasped. Him, not her.

“We’re almost there,” Edward said, and he stared at a fixed point in the sky.

Automatically, my eyes followed his. There was a dark purple cloud hanging low over the trees. A cloud? But it was so abnormally sunny… . No, not a cloud — I recognized the thick column of smoke, just like the one at our campsite.

"Edward," I said, my voice nearly inaudible. "Edward, someone got hurt."

I'd heard Seth's agony, seen the torture in Edward's face.

"Yes," he whispered.

"Who?" I asked, though, of course, I already knew the answer.

Of course I did. Of course.

The trees were slowing around us as we came to our destination.

It took him a long moment to answer me.

"Jacob," he said.

I was able to nod once.

"Of course," I whispered.

And then I slipped off the edge I was clinging to inside my head.

Everything went black.

I was first aware of the cool hands touching me. More than one pair of hands. Arms holding me, a palm curved to fit my cheek, fingers stroking my forehead, and more fingers pressed lightly into my wrist.

Then I was aware of the voices. They were just a humming at first, and then they grew in volume and clarity like someone was turning up a radio.

"Carlisle — it's been five minutes." Edward's voice, anxious.

"She'll come around when she's ready, Edward." Carlisle's voice, always calm and sure. "She's had too much to deal with today. Let her mind protect itself."

But my mind was not protected. It was trapped in the knowledge that had not left me, even in unconsciousness — the pain that was part of the blackness.

I felt totally disconnected from my body. Like I was caged in some small corner of my head, no longer at the controls. But I couldn't do anything about it. I couldn't think. The agony was too strong for that. There was no escape from it.

Jacob.

No, no, no, no, no …

"Alice, how long do we have?" Edward demanded, his voice still tense; Carlisle's soothing words had not helped.

From farther away, Alice's voice. It was brightly chipper. "Another five minutes. And Bella will open her eyes in thirty-seven seconds. I wouldn't doubt that she can hear us now."

"Bella, honey?" This was Esme's soft, comforting voice. "Can you hear me? You're safe now, dear."

Yes, I was safe. Did that really matter?

Then cool lips were at my ear, and Edward was speaking the words that allowed me to escape from the torture that had me caged inside my own head.

"He's going to live, Bella. Jacob Black is healing as I speak. He'll be fine."

As the pain and dread eased, I found my way back to my body. My eyelids fluttered.

"Oh, Bella," Edward sighed in relief, and his lips touched mine.

"Edward," I whispered.

"Yes, I'm here."

I got my lids to open, and I stared into warm gold.

"Jacob is okay?" I asked.

"Yes," he promised.

I watched his eyes carefully for some sign that he was placating me, but they were perfectly clear.

"I examined him myself," Carlisle said then; I turned my head to find his face, only a few feet away. Carlisle's expression was serious and reassuring at the same time. It was impossible to doubt him. "His life is not in any danger. He was healing at an incredible rate, though his injuries were extensive enough that it will still be a few days before he is back to normal, even if the rate of repair holds steady. As soon as we're done here, I will do what I can to help him. Sam is trying to get him to phase back to his human form. That will make treating him easier." Carlisle smiled slightly. "I've never been to veterinarian school."

"What happened to him?" I whispered. "How bad are his injuries?"

Carlisle's face was serious again. "Another wolf was in trouble —"

"Leah," I breathed.

"Yes. He knocked her out of the way, but he didn't have time to defend himself. The newborn got his arms around him. Most of the bones on the right half of his body were shattered."

I flinched.

"Sam and Paul got there in time. He was already improving when they took him back to La Push."

"He'll be back to normal?" I asked.

"Yes, Bella. He won't have any permanent damage."

I took a deep breath.

"Three minutes," Alice said quietly.

I struggled, trying to get vertical. Edward realized what I was doing and helped me to my feet.

I stared at the scene in front of me.

The Cullens stood in a loose semicircle around the bonfire. There were hardly any flames visible, just the thick, purple-black smoke, hovering like a disease against the bright grass. Jasper stood closest to the solid-seeming haze, in its shadow so that his skin did not glitter brilliantly in the sun the way the others did. He had his back to me, his shoulders tense, his arms slightly extended. There was something there, in his shadow. Something he crouched over with wary intensity… .

I was too numb to feel more than a mild shock when I realized what it was.

There were eight vampires in the clearing.

The girl was curled into a small ball beside the flames, her arms wrapped around her legs. She was very young. Younger than me — she looked maybe fifteen, dark-haired and slight. Her eyes were focused on me, and the irises were a shocking, brilliant red. Much brighter than Riley's, almost glowing. They wheeled wildly, out of control.

Edward saw my bewildered expression.

"She surrendered," he told me quietly. "That's one I've never seen before. Only Carlisle would think of offering. Jasper doesn't approve."

I couldn't tear my gaze away from the scene beside the fire. Jasper was rubbing absently at his left forearm.

"Is Jasper all right?" I whispered.

"He's fine. The venom stings."

"He was bitten?" I asked, horrified.

"He was trying to be everywhere at once. Trying to make sure Alice had nothing to do, actually." Edward shook his head. "Alice doesn't need anyone's help."

Alice grimaced toward her true love. "Overprotective fool."

The young female suddenly threw her head back like an animal and wailed shrilly.

Jasper growled at her and she cringed back, but her fingers dug into the ground like claws and her head whipped back and forth in anguish. Jasper took a step toward her, slipping deeper into his crouch. Edward moved with overdone casualness, turning our bodies so that he was between the girl and me. I peeked around his arm to watch the thrashing girl and Jasper.

Carlisle was at Jasper's side in an instant. He put a restraining hand on his most recent son's arm.

"Have you changed your mind, young one?" Carlisle asked, calm as ever. "We don't want to destroy you, but we will if you can't control yourself."

"How can you stand it?" the girl groaned in a high, clear voice. "I want her." Her bright crimson irises focused on Edward, through him, beyond him to me, and her nails ripped through the hard soil again.

"You must stand it," Carlisle told her gravely. "You must exercise control. It is possible, and it is the only thing that will save you now."

The girl clutched her dirt-encrusted hands around her head, yowling quietly.

"Shouldn't we move away from her?" I whispered, tugging on Edward's arm. The girl's lips pulled back over her teeth when she heard my voice, her expression one of torment.

"We have to stay here," Edward murmured. "They are coming to the north end of the clearing now."

My heart burst into a sprint as I scanned the clearing, but I couldn't see anything past the thick pall of smoke.

After a second of fruitless searching, my gaze crept back to the young female vampire. She was still watching me, her eyes half-mad.

I met the girl's stare for a long moment. Chin-length dark hair framed her face, which was alabaster pale. It was hard to tell if her features were beautiful, twisted as they were by rage and thirst. The feral red eyes were dominant — hard to look away from. She glared at me viciously, shuddering and writhing every few seconds.

I stared at her, mesmerized, wondering if I were looking into a mirror of my future.

Then Carlisle and Jasper began to back toward the rest of us. Emmett, Rosalie, and Esme all converged hastily around where Edward stood with Alice and me. A united front, as Edward had said, with me at the heart, in the safest place.

I tore my attention away from the wild girl to search for the approaching monsters.

There was still nothing to see. I glanced at Edward, and his eyes were locked straight ahead. I tried to follow his gaze, but there was only the smoke — dense, oily smoke twisting low to the ground, rising lazily, undulating against the grass.

It billowed forward, darker in the middle.

"Hmm," a dead voice murmured from the mist. I recognized the apathy at once.

"Welcome, Jane." Edward's tone was coolly courteous.

The dark shapes came closer, separating themselves from the haze, solidifying. I knew it would be Jane in

the front — the darkest cloak, almost black, and the smallest figure by more than two feet. I could just barely make out Jane's angelic features in the shade of the cowl.

The four gray-shrouded figures hulking behind her were also somewhat familiar. I was sure I recognized the biggest one, and while I stared, trying to confirm my suspicion, Felix looked up. He let his hood fall back slightly so that I could see him wink at me and smile. Edward was very still at my side, tightly in control.

Jane's gaze moved slowly across the luminous faces of the Cullens and then touched on the newborn girl beside the fire; the newborn had her head in her hands again.

"I don't understand." Jane's voice was toneless, but not quite as uninterested as before.

"She has surrendered," Edward explained, answering the confusion in her mind.

Jane's dark eyes flashed to his face. "Surrendered?"

Felix and another shadow exchanged a quick glance.

Edward shrugged. "Carlisle gave her the option."

"There are no options for those who break the rules," Jane said flatly.

Carlisle spoke then, his voice mild. "That's in your hands. As long as she was willing to halt her attack on us, I saw no need to destroy her. She was never taught."

"That is irrelevant," Jane insisted.

"As you wish."

Jane stared at Carlisle in consternation. She shook her head infinitesimally, and then composed her features.

"Aro hoped that we would get far enough west to see you, Carlisle. He sends his regards."

Carlisle nodded. "I would appreciate it if you would convey mine to him."

"Of course." Jane smiled. Her face was almost too lovely when it was animated. She looked back toward the smoke. "It appears that you've done our work for us today ... for the most part." Her eyes flickered to the hostage. "Just out of professional curiosity, how many were there? They left quite a wake of destruction in Seattle."

"Eighteen, including this one," Carlisle answered.

Jane's eyes widened, and she looked at the fire again, seeming to reassess the size of it. Felix and the other shadow exchanged a longer glance.

"Eighteen?" she repeated, her voice sounding unsure for the first time.

"All brand-new," Carlisle said dismissively. "They were unskilled."

"All?" Her voice turned sharp. "Then who was their creator?"

"Her name was Victoria," Edward answered, no emotion in his voice.

"Was?" Jane asked.

Edward inclined his head toward the eastern forest. Jane's eyes snapped up and focused on something far in the distance. The other pillar of smoke? I didn't look away to check.

Jane stared to the east for a long moment, and then examined the closer bonfire again.

"This Victoria — she was in addition to the eighteen here?"

"Yes. She had only one other with her. He was not as young as this one here, but no older than a year."

"Twenty," Jane breathed. "Who dealt with the creator?"

"I did," Edward told her.

Jane's eyes narrowed, and she turned to the girl beside the fire.

"You there," she said, her dead voice harsher than before. "Your name."

The newborn shot a baleful glare at Jane, her lips pressed tightly together.

Jane smiled back angelically.

The newborn girl's answering scream was ear-piercing; her body arched stiffly into a distorted, unnatural position. I looked away, fighting the urge to cover my ears. I gritted my teeth, hoping to control my stomach. The screaming intensified. I tried to concentrate on Edward's face, smooth and unemotional, but that made me remember when it had been Edward under Jane's torturing gaze, and I

felt sicker. I looked at Alice instead, and Esme next to her. Their faces were as empty as his.

Finally, it was quiet.

“Your name,” Jane said again, her voice inflectionless.

“Bree,” the girl gasped.

Jane smiled, and the girl shrieked again. I held my breath until the sound of her agony stopped.

“She’ll tell you anything you want to know,” Edward said through his teeth. “You don’t have to do that.”

Jane looked up, sudden humor in her usually dead eyes. “Oh, I know,” she said to Edward, grinning at him before she turned back to the young vampire, Bree.

“Bree,” Jane said, her voice cold again. “Is his story true? Were there twenty of you?”

The girl lay panting, the side of her face pressed against the earth. She spoke quickly. “Nineteen or twenty, maybe more, I don’t know!” She cringed, terrified that her ignorance might bring on another round of torture. “Sara and the one whose name I don’t know got in a fight on the way… .”

“And this Victoria — did she create you?”

“I don’t know,” she said, flinching again. “Riley never said her name. I didn’t see that night … it was so dark, and it hurt… .” Bree shuddered. “He didn’t want us to be able to think of her. He said that our thoughts weren’t safe… .”

Jane's eyes flickered to Edward, and then back to the girl.

Victoria had planned this well. If she hadn't followed Edward, there would have been no way to know for certain that she was involved… .

"Tell me about Riley," Jane said. "Why did he bring you here?"

"Riley told us that we had to destroy the strange yellow-eyes here," Bree babbled quickly and willingly. "He said it would be easy. He said that the city was theirs, and they were coming to get us. He said once they were gone, all the blood would be ours. He gave us her scent." Bree lifted one hand and stabbed a finger in my direction. "He said we would know that we had the right coven, because she would be with them. He said whoever got to her first could have her."

I heard Edward's jaw flex beside me.

"It looks like Riley was wrong about the easy part," Jane noted.

Bree nodded, seeming relieved that the conversation had taken this non-painful course. She sat up carefully. "I don't know what happened. We split up, but the others never came. And Riley left us, and he didn't come to help like he promised. And then it was so confusing, and everybody was in pieces." She shuddered again. "I was afraid. I wanted to run away. That one" — she looked at Carlisle — "said they wouldn't hurt me if I stopped fighting."

"Ah, but that wasn't his gift to offer, young one," Jane murmured, her voice oddly gentle now. "Broken rules demand a consequence."

Bree stared at her, not comprehending.

Jane looked at Carlisle. “Are you sure you got all of them? The other half that split off?”

Carlisle’s face was very smooth as he nodded. “We split up, too.”

Jane half-smiled. “I can’t deny that I’m impressed.” The big shadows behind her murmured in agreement. “I’ve never seen a coven escape this magnitude of offensive intact. Do you know what was behind it? It seems like extreme behavior, considering the way you live here. And why was the girl the key?” Her eyes rested unwilling on me for one short second.

I shivered.

“Victoria held a grudge against Bella,” Edward told her, his voice impassive.

Jane laughed — the sound was golden, the bubbling laugh of a happy child. “This one seems to bring out bizarrely strong reactions in our kind,” she observed, smiling directly at me, her face beatific.

Edward stiffened. I looked at him in time to see his face turning away, back to Jane.

“Would you please not do that?” he asked in a tight voice.

Jane laughed again lightly. “Just checking. No harm done, apparently.”

I shivered, deeply grateful that the strange glitch in my system — which had protected me from Jane the last time we’d met — was still in effect. Edward’s arm tightened around me.

“Well, it appears that there’s not much left for us to do. Odd,” Jane said, apathy creeping back into her voice. “We’re not used to being rendered unnecessary. It’s too bad we missed the fight. It sounds like it would have been entertaining to watch.”

“Yes,” Edward answered her quickly, his voice sharp. “And you were so close. It’s a shame you didn’t arrive just a half hour earlier. Perhaps then you could have fulfilled your purpose here.”

Jane met Edward’s glare with unwavering eyes. “Yes. Quite a pity how things turned out, isn’t it?”

Edward nodded once to himself, his suspicions confirmed.

Jane turned to look at the newborn Bree again, her face completely bored. “Felix?” she drawled.

“Wait,” Edward interjected.

Jane raised one eyebrow, but Edward was staring at Carlisle while he spoke in an urgent voice. “We could explain the rules to the young one. She doesn’t seem unwilling to learn. She didn’t know what she was doing.”

“Of course,” Carlisle answered. “We would certainly be prepared to take responsibility for Bree.”

Jane’s expression was torn between amusement and disbelief.

“We don’t make exceptions,” she said. “And we don’t give second chances. It’s bad for our reputation. Which reminds me ...” Suddenly, her eyes were on me again, and her cherubic face dimpled. “Caius will be

so interested to hear that you’re still human, Bella. Perhaps he’ll decide to visit.”

“The date is set,” Alice told Jane, speaking for the first time. “Perhaps we’ll come to visit you in a few months.”

Jane’s smile faded, and she shrugged indifferently, never looking at Alice. She turned to face Carlisle. “It was nice to meet you, Carlisle — I’d thought Aro was exaggerating. Well, until we meet again …”

Carlisle nodded, his expression pained.

“Take care of that, Felix,” Jane said, nodding toward Bree, her voice dripping boredom. “I want to go home.”

“Don’t watch,” Edward whispered in my ear.

I was only too eager to follow his instruction. I’d seen more than enough for one day — more than enough for one lifetime. I squeezed my eyes tightly together and turned my face into Edward’s chest.

But I could still hear.

There was a deep, rumbling growl, and then a high-pitched keen that was horribly familiar. That sound cut off quickly, and then the only sound was a sickening crunching and snapping.

Edward’s hand rubbed anxiously against my shoulders.

“Come,” Jane said, and I looked up in time to see the backs of the tall gray cloaks drifting away toward the curling smoke. The incense smell was strong again — fresh.

The gray cloaks disappeared into the thick mist.

# Chapter 26

## ETHICS

The counter in Alice's bathroom was covered with a thousand different products, all claiming to beautify a person's surface. Since everyone in this house was both perfect and impermeable, I could only assume that she'd bought most of these things with me in mind. I read the labels numbly, struck by the waste.

I was careful never to look in the long mirror.

Alice combed through my hair with a slow, rhythmic motion.

"That's enough, Alice," I said tonelessly. "I want to go back to La Push."

How many hours had I waited for Charlie to finally leave Billy's house so that I could see Jacob? Each minute, not knowing if Jacob was still breathing or not, had seemed like ten lifetimes. And then, when at last I'd been allowed to go, to see for myself that Jacob was alive, the time had gone so quickly. I felt like I'd barely caught my breath before Alice was calling Edward, insisting that I keep up this ridiculous sleepover façade. It seemed so insignificant… .

"Jacob's still unconscious," Alice answered. "Carlisle or Edward will call when he's awake. Anyway, you need to go see Charlie. He was there at Billy's house, he saw that Carlisle and Edward are back in from their trip, and he's bound to be suspicious when you get home."

I already had my story memorized and corroborated. “I don’t care. I want to be there when Jacob wakes up.”

“You need to think of Charlie now. You’ve had a long day — sorry, I know that doesn’t begin to cover it — but that doesn’t mean that you can shirk your responsibilities.” Her voice was serious, almost chiding. “It’s more important now than ever that Charlie stays safely in the dark. Play your role first, Bella, and then you can do what you want second. Part of being a Cullen is being meticulously responsible.”

Of course she was right. And if not for this same reason — a reason that was more powerful than all my fear and pain and guilt — Carlisle would never have been able to talk me into leaving Jacob’s side, unconscious or not.

“Go home,” Alice ordered. “Talk to Charlie. Flesh out your alibi. Keep him safe.”

I stood, and the blood flowed down to my feet, stinging like the pricks of a thousand needles. I’d been sitting still for a long time.

“That dress is adorable on you,” Alice cooed.

“Huh? Oh. Er — thanks again for the clothes,” I mumbled out of courtesy rather than real gratitude.

“You need the evidence,” Alice said, her eyes innocent and wide. “What’s a shopping trip without a new outfit? It’s very flattering, if I do say so myself.”

I blinked, unable to remember what she’d dressed me in. I couldn’t keep my thoughts from skittering away every few seconds, insects running from the light… .

"Jacob is fine, Bella," Alice said, easily interpreting my preoccupation. "There's no hurry. If you realized how much extra morphine Carlisle had to give him — what with his temperature burning it off so quickly — you would know that he's going to be out for a while."

At least he wasn't in any pain. Not yet.

"Is there anything you want to talk about before you leave?" Alice asked sympathetically. "You must be more than a little traumatized."

I knew what she was curious about. But I had other questions.

"Will I be like that?" I asked her, my voice subdued. "Like that girl Bree in the meadow?"

There were many things I needed to think of, but I couldn't seem to get her out of my head, the newborn whose other life was now — abruptly — over. Her face, twisted with desire for my blood, lingered behind my eyelids.

Alice stroked my arm. "Everyone is different. But something like that, yes."

I was very still, trying to imagine.

"It passes," she promised.

"How soon?"

She shrugged. "A few years, maybe less. It might be different for you. I've never seen anyone go through this who's chosen it beforehand. It should be interesting to see how that affects you."

"Interesting," I repeated.

"We'll keep you out of trouble."

"I know that. I trust you." My voice was monotone, dead.

Alice's forehead puckered. "If you're worried about Carlisle and Edward, I'm sure they'll be fine. I believe Sam is beginning to trust us … well, to trust Carlisle, at least. It's a good thing, too. I imagine the atmosphere got a little tense when Carlisle had to rebreak the fractures —"

"Please, Alice."

"Sorry."

I took a deep breath to steady myself. Jacob had begun healing too quickly, and some of his bones had set wrong. He'd been out cold for the process, but it was still hard to think about.

"Alice, can I ask you a question? About the future?"

She was suddenly wary. "You know I don't see everything."

"It's not that, exactly. But you do see my future, sometimes. Why is that, do you think, when nothing else works on me? Not what Jane can do, or Edward or Aro …" My sentence trailed off with my interest level. My curiosity on this point was fleeting, heavily overshadowed by more pressing emotions.

Alice, however, found the question very interesting. "Jasper, too, Bella — his talent works on your body just as well as it does on anyone else's. That's the difference, do you see it? Jasper's abilities affect the body physically. He really does calm your system down, or excite it. It's not an illusion. And I see

visions of outcomes, not the reasons and thoughts behind the decisions that create them. It's outside the mind, not an illusion, either; reality, or at least one version of it. But Jane and Edward and Aro and Demetri — they work inside the mind. Jane only creates an illusion of pain. She doesn't really hurt your body, you only think you feel it. You see, Bella? You are safe inside your mind. No one can reach you there. It's no wonder that Aro was so curious about your future abilities."

She watched my face to see if I was following her logic. In truth, her words had all started to run together, the syllables and sounds losing their meaning. I couldn't concentrate on them. Still, I nodded. Trying to look like I got it.

She wasn't fooled. She stroked my cheek and murmured, "He's going to be okay, Bella. I don't need a vision to know that. Are you ready to go?"

"One more thing. Can I ask you another question about the future? I don't want specifics, just an overview."

"I'll do my best," she said, doubtful again.

"Can you still see me becoming a vampire?"

"Oh, that's easy. Sure, I do."

I nodded slowly.

She examined my face, her eyes unfathomable. "Don't you know your own mind, Bella?"

"I do. I just wanted to be sure."

"I'm only as sure as you are, Bella. You know that. If you were to change your mind, what I see would change ... or disappear, in your case."

I sighed. "That isn't going to happen, though."

She put her arms around me. "I'm sorry. I can't really empathize. My first memory is of seeing Jasper's face in my future; I always knew that he was where my life was headed. But I can sympathize. I'm so sorry you have to choose between two good things."

I shook off her arms. "Don't feel sorry for me." There were people who deserved sympathy. I wasn't one of them. And there wasn't any choice to make — there was just breaking a good heart to attend to now. "I'll go deal with Charlie."

I drove my truck home, where Charlie was waiting just as suspiciously as Alice had expected.

"Hey, Bella. How was your shopping trip?" he greeted me when I walked into the kitchen. He had his arms folded over his chest, his eyes on my face.

"Long," I said dully. "We just got back."

Charlie assessed my mood. "I guess you already heard about Jake, then?"

"Yes. The rest of the Cullens beat us home. Esme told us where Carlisle and Edward were."

"Are you okay?"

"Worried about Jake. As soon as I make dinner, I'm going down to La Push."

"I told you those motorcycles were dangerous. I hope this makes you realize that I wasn't kidding around."

I nodded as I started pulling things out of the fridge. Charlie settled himself in at the table. He seemed to be in a more talkative mood than usual.

"I don't think you need to worry about Jake too much. Anyone who can cuss with that kind of energy is going to recover."

"Jake was awake when you saw him?" I asked, spinning to look at him.

"Oh, yeah, he was awake. You should have heard him — actually, it's better you didn't. I don't think there was anyone in La Push who couldn't hear him. I don't know where he picked up that vocabulary, but I hope he hasn't been using that kind of language around you."

"He had a pretty good excuse today. How did he look?"

"Messed up. His friends carried him in. Good thing they're big boys, 'cause that kid's an armful. Carlisle said his right leg is broken, and his right arm. Pretty much the whole right side of his body got crushed when he wrecked that damn bike." Charlie shook his head. "If I ever hear of you riding again, Bella —"

"No problem there, Dad. You won't. Do you really think Jake's okay?"

"Sure, Bella, don't worry. He was himself enough to tease me."

"Tease you?" I echoed in shock.

"Yeah — in between insulting somebody's mother and taking the Lord's name in vain, he said, 'Bet you're glad she loves Cullen instead of me today, huh, Charlie?'"

I turned back to the fridge so that he couldn't see my face.

"And I couldn't argue. Edward's more mature than Jacob when it comes to your safety, I'll give him that much."

"Jacob's plenty mature," I muttered defensively. "I'm sure this wasn't his fault."

"Weird day today," Charlie mused after a minute. "You know, I don't put much stock in that superstitious crap, but it was odd… . It was like Billy knew something bad was going to happen to Jake. He was nervous as a turkey on Thanksgiving all morning. I don't think he heard anything I said to him.

"And then, weirder than that — remember back in February and March when we had all that trouble with the wolves?"

I bent down to get a frying pan out of the cupboard, and hid there an extra second or two.

"Yeah," I mumbled.

"I hope we're not going to have a problem with that again. This morning, we were out in the boat, and Billy wasn't paying any attention to me or the fish, when all of a sudden, you could hear wolves yowling in the woods. More than one, and, boy, was it loud. Sounded like they were right there in the village. Weirdest part was, Billy turned the boat around and headed straight back to the harbor like they were

calling to him personally. Didn't even hear me ask what he was doing.

"The noise stopped before we got the boat docked. But all of a sudden Billy was in the biggest hurry not to miss the game, though we had hours still. He was mumbling some nonsense about an earlier showing … of a live game? I tell you, Bella, it was odd.

"Well, he found some game he said he wanted to watch, but then he just ignored it. He was on the phone the whole time, calling Sue, and Emily, and your friend Quil's grandpa. Couldn't quite make out what he was looking for — he just chatted real casual with them.

"Then the howling started again right outside the house. I've never heard anything like it — I had goose bumps on my arms. I asked Billy — had to shout over the noise — if he'd been setting traps in his yard. It sounded like the animal was in serious pain."

I winced, but Charlie was so caught up in his story that he didn't notice.

"'Course I forgot all about that till just this minute, 'cause that's when Jake made it home. One minute it was that wolf yowling, and then you couldn't hear it anymore — Jake's cussing drowned it right out. Got a set of lungs on him, that boy does."

Charlie paused for a minute, his face thoughtful. "Funny that some good should come out of this mess. I didn't think they were ever going to get over that fool prejudice they have against the Cullens down there. But somebody called Carlisle, and Billy was real grateful when he showed up. I thought we should get Jake up to the hospital, but Billy wanted to keep him home, and Carlisle agreed. I guess Carlisle knows

what's best. Generous of him to sign up for such a long stretch of house calls."

"And ..." he paused, as if unwilling to say something. He sighed, and then continued. "And Edward was really ... nice. He seemed as worried about Jacob as you are — like that was his brother lying there. The look in his eyes ..." Charlie shook his head. "He's a decent guy, Bella. I'll try to remember that. No promises, though." He grinned at me.

"I won't hold you to it," I mumbled.

Charlie stretched his legs and groaned. "It's nice to be home. You wouldn't believe how crowded Billy's little place gets. Seven of Jake's friends all squished themselves into that little front room — I could hardly breathe. Have you ever noticed how big those Quileute kids all are?"

"Yeah, I have."

Charlie stared at me, his eyes abruptly more focused. "Really, Bella, Carlisle said Jake will be up and around in no time. Said it looked a lot worse than it was. He's going to be fine."

I just nodded.

Jacob had looked so ... strangely fragile when I'd hurried down to see him as soon as Charlie had left. He'd had braces everywhere — Carlisle said there was no point in plaster, as fast as he was healing. His face had been pale and drawn, deeply unconscious though he was at the time. Breakable. Huge as he was, he'd looked very breakable. Maybe that had just been my imagination, coupled with the knowledge that I was going to have to break him.

If only I could be struck by lightning and be split in two. Preferably painfully. For the first time, giving up being human felt like a true sacrifice. Like it might be too much to lose.

I put Charlie's dinner on the table next to his elbow and headed for the door.

"Er, Bella? Could you wait just a second?"

"Did I forget something?" I asked, eyeing his plate.

"No, no. I just ... want to ask a favor." Charlie frowned and looked at the floor. "Have a seat — this won't take long."

I sat across from him, a little confused. I tried to focus. "What do you need, Dad?"

"Here's the gist of it, Bella." Charlie flushed. "Maybe I'm just feeling ... superstitious after hanging out with Billy while he was being so strange all day. But I have this ... hunch. I feel like ... I'm going to lose you soon."

"Don't be silly, Dad," I mumbled guiltily. "You want me to go to school, don't you?"

"Just promise me one thing."

I was hesitant, ready to rescind. "Okay ..."

"Will you tell me before you do anything major? Before you run off with him or something?"

"Dad ... ," I moaned.

“I’m serious. I won’t kick up a fuss. Just give me some advance notice. Give me a chance to hug you goodbye.”

Cringing mentally, I held up my hand. “This is silly. But, if it makes you happy, ... I promise.”

“Thanks, Bella,” he said. “I love you, kid.”

“I love you, too, Dad.” I touched his shoulder, and then shoved away from the table. “If you need anything, I’ll be at Billy’s.”

I didn’t look back as I ran out. This was just perfect, just what I needed right now. I grumbled to myself all the way to La Push.

Carlisle’s black Mercedes was not in front of Billy’s house. That was both good and bad. Obviously, I needed to talk to Jacob alone. Yet I still wished I could somehow hold Edward’s hand, like I had before, when Jacob was unconscious. Impossible. But I missed Edward — it had seemed like a very long afternoon alone with Alice. I supposed that made my answer quite obvious. I already knew that I couldn’t live without Edward. That fact wasn’t going to make this any less painful.

I tapped quietly on the front door.

“Come in, Bella,” Billy said. The roar of my truck was easy to recognize.

I let myself in.

“Hey, Billy. Is he awake?” I asked.

“He woke up about a half hour ago, just before the doctor left. Go on in. I think he’s been waiting for you.”

I flinched, and then took a deep breath. “Thanks.”

I hesitated at the door to Jacob’s room, not sure whether to knock. I decided to peek first, hoping — coward that I was — that maybe he’d gone back to sleep. I felt like I could use just a few more minutes.

I opened the door a crack and leaned hesitantly in.

Jacob was waiting for me, his face calm and smooth. The haggard, gaunt look was gone, but only a careful blankness took its place. There was no animation in his dark eyes.

It was hard to look at his face, knowing that I loved him. It made more of a difference than I would have thought. I wondered if it had always been this hard for him, all this time.

Thankfully, someone had covered him with a quilt. It was a relief not to have to see the extent of the damage.

I stepped in and shut the door quietly behind me.

“Hi, Jake,” I murmured.

He didn’t answer at first. He looked at my face for a long moment. Then, with some effort, he rearranged his expression into a slightly mocking smile.

“Yeah, I sort of thought it might be like that.” He sighed. “Today has definitely taken a turn for the worse. First I pick the wrong place, miss the best fight, and Seth gets all the glory. Then Leah has to be

an idiot trying to prove she's as tough as the rest of us and I have to be the idiot who saves her. And now this." He waved his left hand toward me where I hesitated by the door.

"How are you feeling?" I mumbled. What a stupid question.

"A little stoned. Dr. Fang isn't sure how much pain medication I need, so he's going with trial and error. Think he overdid it."

"But you're not in pain."

"No. At least, I can't feel my injuries," he said, smiling mockingly again.

I bit my lip. I was never going to get through this. Why didn't anyone ever try to kill me when I wanted to die?

The wry humor left his face, and his eyes warmed up. His forehead creased, like he was worried.

"How about you?" he asked, sounding really concerned. "Are you okay?"

"Me?" I stared at him. Maybe he had taken too many drugs. "Why?"

"Well, I mean, I was pretty sure that he wouldn't actually hurt you, but I wasn't sure how bad it was going to be. I've been going a little crazy with worrying about you ever since I woke up. I didn't know if you were going to be allowed to visit or anything. The suspense was terrible. How did it go? Was he mean to you? I'm sorry if it was bad. I didn't mean for you to have to go through that alone. I was thinking I'd be there... ."

It took me a minute to even understand. He babbled on, looking more and more awkward, until I got what he was saying. Then I hurried to reassure him.

“No, no, Jake! I’m fine. Too fine, really. Of course he wasn’t mean. I wish!”

His eyes widened in what looked like horror. “What?”

“He wasn’t even mad at me — he wasn’t even mad at you! He’s so unselfish it makes me feel even worse. I wish he would have yelled at me or something. It’s not like I don’t deserve ... well, much worse that getting yelled at. But he doesn’t care. He just wants me to be happy.”

“He wasn’t mad?” Jacob asked, incredulous.

“No. He was ... much too kind.”

Jacob stared for another minute, and then he suddenly frowned. “Well, damn!” he growled.

“What’s wrong, Jake? Does it hurt?” My hands fluttered uselessly as I looked around for his medication.

“No,” he grumbled in a disgusted tone. “I can’t believe this! He didn’t give you an ultimatum or anything?”

“Not even close — what’s wrong with you?”

He scowled and shook his head. “I was sort of counting on his reaction. Damn it all. He’s better than I thought.”

The way he said it, though angrier, reminded me of Edward’s tribute to Jacob’s lack of ethics in the tent

this morning. Which meant that Jake was still hoping, still fighting. I winced as that stabbed deep.

“He’s not playing any game, Jake,” I said quietly.

“You bet he is. He’s playing every bit as hard as I am, only he knows what he’s doing and I don’t. Don’t blame me because he’s a better manipulator than I am — I haven’t been around long enough to learn all his tricks.”

“He isn’t manipulating me!”

“Yes, he is! When are you going to wake up and realize that he’s not a perfect as you think he is?”

“At least he didn’t threaten to kill himself to make me kiss him,” I snapped. As soon as the words were out, I flushed with chagrin. “Wait. Pretend that didn’t slip out. I swore to myself that I wasn’t going to say anything about that.”

He took a deep breath. When he spoke, he was calmer. “Why not?”

“Because I didn’t come here to blame you for anything.”

“It’s true, though,” he said evenly. “I did do that.”

“I don’t care, Jake. I’m not mad.”

He smiled. “I don’t care, either. I knew you’d forgive me, and I’m glad I did it. I’d do it again. At least I have that much. At least I made you see that you do love me. That’s worth something.”

“Is it? Is it really better than if I was still in the dark?”

"Don't you think you ought to know how you feel — just so that it doesn't take you by surprise someday when it's too late and you're a married vampire?"

I shook my head. "No — I didn't mean better for me. I meant better for you. Does it make things better or worse for you, having me know that I'm in love with you? When it doesn't make a difference either way. Would it have been better, easier for you, if I never clued in?"

He took my question as seriously as I'd meant it, thinking carefully before he answered. "Yes, it's better to have you know," he finally decided. "If you hadn't figured it out … I'd have always wondered if your decision would have been different if you had. Now I know. I did everything I could." He dragged in an unsteady breath, and closed his eyes.

This time I did not — could not — resist the urge to comfort him. I crossed the small room and kneeled by his head, afraid to sit on the bed in case I jostled it and hurt him, and leaned in to touch my forehead to his cheek.

Jacob sighed, and put his hand on my hair, holding me there.

"I'm so sorry, Jake."

"I always knew this was a long shot. It's not your fault, Bella."

"Not you, too," I moaned. "Please."

He pulled away to look at me. "What?"

"It is my fault. And I'm so sick of being told it's not."

He grinned. It didn't touch his eyes. "You want me to haul you over the coals?"

"Actually … I think I do."

He pursed his lips as he measured how much I meant it. A smile flashed across his face briefly, and then he twisted his expression into a fierce scowl.

"Kissing me back like that was inexcusable." He spit the words at me. "If you knew you were just going to take it back, maybe you shouldn't have been quite so convincing about it."

I winced and nodded. "I'm so sorry."

"Sorry doesn't make anything better, Bella. What were you thinking?"

"I wasn't," I whispered.

"You should have told me to go die. That's what you want."

"No, Jacob," I whimpered, fighting against the budding tears. "No! Never."

"You're not crying?" he demanded, his voice suddenly back to its normal tone. He twitched impatiently on the bed.

"Yeah," I muttered, laughing weakly at myself through the tears that were suddenly sobs.

He shifted his weight, throwing his good leg off the bed as if he were going to try to stand.

"What are you doing?" I demanded through the tears. "Lie down, you idiot, you'll hurt yourself!" I jumped to

my feet and pushed his good shoulder down with two hands.

He surrendered, leaning back with a gasp of pain, but he grabbed me around my waist and pulled me down on the bed, against his good side. I curled up there, trying to stifle the silly sobs against his hot skin.

“I can’t believe you’re crying,” he mumbled. “You know I just said those things because you wanted me to. I didn’t mean them.” His hand rubbed against my shoulders.

“I know.” I took a deep, ragged breath, trying to control myself. How did I end up being the one crying while he did the comforting? “It’s all still true, though. Thanks for saying it out loud.”

“Do I get points for making you cry?”

“Sure, Jake.” I tried to smile. “As many as you want.”

“Don’t worry, Bella, honey. It’s all going to work out.”

“I don’t see how,” I muttered.

He patted the top of my head. “I’m going to give in and be good.”

“More games?” I wondered, tilting my chin so that I could see his face.

“Maybe.” He laughed with a bit of effort, and then winced. “But I’m going to try.”

I frowned.

“Don’t be so pessimistic,” he complained. “Give me a little credit.”

"What do you mean by 'be good'?"

"I'll be your friend, Bella," he said quietly. "I won't ask for more than that."

"I think it's too late for that, Jake. How can we be friends, when we love each other like this?"

He looked at the ceiling, his stare intent, as if he were reading something that was written there. "Maybe ... it will have to be a long-distance friendship."

I clenched my teeth together, glad he wasn't looking at my face, fighting against the sobs that threatened to overtake me again. I needed to be strong, and I had no idea how... .

"You know that story in the Bible?" Jacob asked suddenly, still reading the blank ceiling. "The one with the king and the two women fighting over the baby?"

"Sure. King Solomon."

"That's right. King Solomon," he repeated. "And he said, cut the kid in half ... but it was only a test. Just to see who would give up their share to protect it."

"Yeah, I remember."

He looked back at my face. "I'm not going to cut you in half anymore, Bella."

I understood what he was saying. He was telling me that he loved me the most, that his surrender proved it. I wanted to defend Edward, to tell Jacob how Edward would do the same thing if I wanted, if I would let him. I was the one who wouldn't renounce

my claim there. But there was no point in starting an argument that would only hurt him more.

I closed my eyes, willing myself to control the pain. I couldn't impose that on him.

We were quiet for a moment. He seemed to be waiting for me to say something; I was trying to think of something to say.

"Can I tell you what the worst part is?" he asked hesitantly when I said nothing. "Do you mind? I am going to be good."

"Will it help?" I whispered.

"It might. It couldn't hurt."

"What's the worst part, then?"

"The worse part is knowing what would have been."

"What might have been." I sighed.

"No." Jacob shook his head. "I'm exactly right for you, Bella. It would have been effortless for us — comfortable, easy as breathing. I was the natural path your life would have taken… ." He stared into space for a moment, and I waited. "If the world was the way it was supposed to be, if there were no monsters and no magic …"

I could see what he saw, and I knew that he was right. If the world was the sane place it was supposed to be, Jacob and I would have been together. And we would have been happy. He was my soul mate in that world — would have been my soul mate still if his claim had not been overshadowed by something

stronger, something so strong that it could not exist in a rational world.

Was it out there for Jacob, too? Something that would trump a soul mate? I had to believe that it was.

Two futures, two soul mates ... too much for any one person. And so unfair that I wouldn't be the only one to pay for it. Jacob's pain seemed too high a price. Cringing at the thought of that price, I wondered if I would have wavered, if I hadn't lost Edward once. If I didn't know what it was like to live without him. I wasn't sure. That knowledge was so deep a part of me, I couldn't imagine how I would feel without it.

"He's like a drug for you, Bella." His voice was still gentle, not at all critical. "I see that you can't live without him now. It's too late. But I would have been healthier for you. Not a drug; I would have been the air, the sun."

The corner of my mouth turned up in a wistful half-smile. "I used to think of you that way, you know. Like the sun. My personal sun. You balanced out the clouds nicely for me."

He sighed. "The clouds I can handle. But I can't fight with an eclipse."

I touched his face, laying my hand against his cheek. He exhaled at my touch and closed his eyes. It was very quiet. For a minute I could hear the beating of his heart, slow and even.

"Tell me the worst part for you," he whispered.

"I think that might be a bad idea."

"Please."

"I think it will hurt."

"Please."

How could I deny him anything at this point?

"The worst part ..." I hesitated, and then let words spill out in a flood of truth. "The worst part is that I saw the whole thing — our whole life. And I want it bad, Jake, I want it all. I want to stay right here and never move. I want to love you and make you happy. And I can't, and it's killing me. It's like Sam and Emily, Jake — I never had a choice. I always knew nothing would change. Maybe that's why I was fighting against you so hard."

He seemed to be concentrating on breathing evenly.

"I knew I shouldn't have told you that."

He shook his head slowly. "No. I'm glad you did. Thank you." He kissed the top of my head, and then he sighed. "I'll be good now."

I looked up, and he was smiling.

"So you're going to get married, huh?"

"We don't have to talk about that."

"I'd like to know some of the details. I don't know when I'll talk to you again."

I had to wait for a minute before I could speak. When I was pretty sure that my voice wouldn't break, I answered his question.

"It's not really my idea ... but, yes. It means a lot to him. I figure, why not?"

Jake nodded. “That’s true. It’s not such a big thing — in comparison.”

His voice was very calm, very practical. I stared at him, curious about how he was managing, and that ruined it. He met my eyes for a second, and then twisted his head away. I waited to speak until his breathing was under control.

“Yes. In comparison,” I agreed.

“How long do you have left?”

“That depends on how long it takes Alice to pull a wedding together.” I suppressed a groan, imagining what Alice would do.

“Before or after?” he asked quietly.

I knew what he meant. “After.”

He nodded. This was a relief to him. I wondered how many sleepless nights the thought of my graduation had given him.

“Are you scared?” he whispered.

“Yes,” I whispered back.

“What are you afraid of?” I could barely hear his voice now. He stared down at my hands.

“Lots of things.” I worked to make my voice lighter, but I stayed honest. “I’ve never been much of a masochist, so I’m not looking forward to the pain. And I wish there was some way to keep him away — I don’t want him to suffer with me, but I don’t think there’s any way around it. There’s dealing with Charlie, too, and Renée… . And then afterward, I hope

I'll be able to control myself soon. Maybe I'll be such a menace that the pack will have to take me out."

He looked up with a disapproving expression. "I'd hamstring any one of my brothers who tried."

"Thanks."

He smiled halfheartedly. Then he frowned. "But isn't it more dangerous than that? In all of the stories, they say it's too hard ... they lose control ... people die... ." He gulped.

"No, I'm not afraid of that. Silly Jacob — don't you know better than to believe vampire stories?"

He obviously didn't appreciate my attempt at humor.

"Well, anyway, lots to worry about. But worth it, in the end."

He nodded unwillingly, and I knew that he in no way agreed with me.

I stretched my neck up to whisper in his ear, laying my cheek against his warm skin. "You know I love you."

"I know," he breathed, his arm tightening automatically around my waist. "You know how much I wish it was enough."

"Yes."

"I'll always be waiting in the wings, Bella," he promised, lightening his tone and loosening his arm. I pulled away with a dull, dragging sense of loss, feeling the tearing separation as I left a part of me behind,

there on the bed next to him. “You’ll always have that spare option if you want it.”

I made an effort to smile. “Until my heart stops beating.”

He grinned back. “You know, I think maybe I’d still take you — maybe. I guess that depends on how much you stink.”

“Should I come back to see you? Or would you rather I didn’t?”

“I’ll think it through and get back to you,” he said. “I might need the company to keep from going crazy. The vampire surgeon extraordinaire says I can’t phase until he gives the okay — it might mess up the way the bones are set.” Jacob made a face.

“Be good and do what Carlisle tells you to do. You’ll get well faster.”

“Sure, sure.”

“I wonder when it will happen,” I said. “When the right girl is going to catch your eye.”

“Don’t get your hopes up, Bella.” Jacob’s voice was abruptly sour. “Though I’m sure it would be a relief for you.”

“Maybe, maybe not. I probably won’t think she’s good enough for you. I wonder how jealous I’ll be.”

“That part might be kind of fun,” he admitted.

“Let me know if you want me to come back, and I’ll be here,” I promised.

With a sigh, he turned his cheek toward me.

I leaned in and kissed his face softly. “Love you, Jacob.”

He laughed lightly. “Love you more.”

He watched me walk out of his room with an unfathomable expression in his black eyes.

# Chapter 27

## NEEDS

I didn't get very far before driving became impossible.

When I couldn't see anymore, I let my tires find the rough shoulder and rolled slowly to a stop. I slumped over on the seat and allowed the weakness I'd fought in Jacob's room crush me. It was worse that I'd thought — the force of it took me by surprise. Yes, I had been right to hide this from Jacob. No one should ever see this.

But I wasn't alone for very long — just exactly long enough for Alice to see me here, and then the few minutes it took him to arrive. The door creaked open, and he pulled me into his arms.

At first it was worse. Because there was that smaller part of me — smaller, but getting louder and angrier every minute, screaming at the rest of me — that craved a different set of arms. So then there was fresh guilt to season the pain.

He didn't say anything, he just let me sob until I began to blubber out Charlie's name.

"Are you really ready to go home?" he asked doubtfully.

I managed to convey, after several attempts, that it wasn't going to get any better anytime soon. I needed to get past Charlie before it got late enough for him to call Billy.

So he drove me home — for once not even getting close to my truck's internal speed limit — keeping one

arm wrapped tightly around me. The whole way, I fought for control. It seemed to be a doomed effort at first, but I didn't give up. Just a few seconds, I told myself. Just time for a few excuses, or a few lies, and then I could break down again. I had to be able to do that much. I scrambled around in my head, searching desperately for a reserve of strength.

There was just enough for me to quiet the sobs — hold them back but not end them. The tears didn't slow. I couldn't seem to find any handle to even begin to work with those.

"Wait for me upstairs," I mumbled when we were in front of the house.

He hugged me closer for one minute, and then he was gone.

Once inside, I headed straight for the stairs.

"Bella?" Charlie called after me from his usual place on the sofa as I walked by.

I turned to look at him without speaking. His eyes bugged wide, and he lurched to his feet.

"What happened? Is Jacob ... ?" he demanded.

I shook my head furiously, trying to find my voice. "He's fine, he's fine," I promised, my voice low and husky. And Jacob was fine, physically, which is all Charlie was worried about at the moment.

"But what happened?" He grabbed my shoulders, his eyes still anxious and wide. "What happened to you?"

I must look worse than I'd imagined.

"Nothing, Dad. I … just had to talk to Jacob about … some things that were hard. I'm fine."

The anxiety calmed, and was replaced by disapproval.

"Was this really the best time?" he asked.

"Probably not, Dad, but I didn't have any alternatives — it just got to the point where I had to choose… . Sometimes, there isn't any way to compromise."

He shook his head slowly. "How did he handle it?"

I didn't answer.

He looked at my face for a minute, and then nodded. That must have been answer enough.

"I hope you didn't mess up his recovery."

"He's a quick healer," I mumbled.

Charlie sighed.

I could feel the control slipping.

"I'll be in my room," I told him, shrugging out from underneath his hands.

"'Kay," Charlie agreed. He could probably see the waterworks starting to escalate. Nothing scared Charlie worse than tears.

I made my way to my room, blind and stumbling.

Once inside, I fought with the clasp on my bracelet, trying to undo it with shaking fingers.

"No, Bella," Edward whispered, capturing my hands. "It's part of who you are."

He pulled me into the cradle of his arms as the sobs broke free again.

This longest of days seemed to stretch on and on and on. I wondered if it would ever end.

But, though the night dragged relentlessly, it was not the worst night of my life. I took comfort from that. And I was not alone. There was a great deal of comfort in that, too.

Charlie's fear of emotional outbursts kept him from checking on me, though I was not quiet — he probably got no more sleep than I did.

My hindsight seemed unbearably clear tonight. I could see every mistake I'd made, every bit of harm I'd done, the small things and the big things. Each pain I'd caused Jacob, each wound I'd given Edward, stacked up into neat piles that I could not ignore or deny.

And I realized that I'd been wrong all along about the magnets. It had not been Edward and Jacob that I'd been trying to force together, it was the two parts of myself, Edward's Bella and Jacob's Bella. But they could not exist together, and I never should have tried.

I'd done so much damage.

At some point in the night, I remembered the promise I'd made to myself early this morning — that I would never make Edward see me shed another tear for Jacob Black. The thought brought on a round of hysteria which frightened Edward more than the

weeping. But it passed, too, when it had run its course.

Edward said little; he just held me on the bed and let me ruin his shirt, staining it with salt water.

It took longer than I thought it would for that smaller, broken part of me to cry herself out. It happened, though, and I was eventually exhausted enough to sleep. Unconsciousness did not bring full relief from the pain, just a numbing, dulling ease, like medicine. Made it more bearable. But it was still there; I was aware of it, even asleep, and that helped me to make the adjustments I needed to make.

The morning brought with it, if not a brighter outlook, as least a measure of control, some acceptance. Instinctively, I knew that the new tear in my heart would always ache. That was just going to be a part of me now. Time would make it easier — that's what everyone always said. But I didn't care if time healed me or not, so long as Jacob could get better. Could be happy again.

When I woke up, there was no disorientation. I opened my eyes — finally dry — and met his anxious gaze.

"Hey," I said. My voice was hoarse. I cleared my throat.

He didn't answer. He watched me, waiting for it to start.

"No, I'm fine," I promised. "That won't happen again."

His eyes tightened at my words.

“I’m sorry that you had to see that,” I said. “That wasn’t fair to you.”

He put his hands on either side of my face.

“Bella … are you sure? Did you make the right choice? I’ve never seen you in so much pain —” His voice broke on the last word.

But I had known worse pain.

I touched his lips. “Yes.”

“I don’t know… .” His brow creased. “If it hurts you so much, how can it possibly be the right thing for you?”

“Edward, I know who I can’t live without.”

“But …”

I shook my head. “You don’t understand. You may be brave enough or strong enough to live without me, if that’s what’s best. But I could never be that self-sacrificing. I have to be with you. It’s the only way I can live.”

He still looked dubious. I should never have let him stay with me last night. But I had needed him so much… .

“Hand me that book, will you?” I asked, pointing over his shoulder.

His eyebrows pulled together in confusion, but he gave it to me quickly.

“This again?” he asked.

"I just wanted to find this one part I remembered … to see how she said it… ." I flipped through the book, finding the page I wanted easily. The corner was dog-eared from the many times I'd stopped here. "Cathy's a monster, but there were a few things she got right," I muttered. I read the lines quietly, mostly to myself. "'If all else perished, and he remained, I should still continue to be; and if all else remained, and he were annihilated, the universe would turn to a mighty stranger.'" I nodded, again to myself. "I know exactly what she means. And I know who I can't live without."

Edward took the book from my hands and flipped it across the room — it landed with a light thud on my desk. He wrapped his arms around my waist.

A small smile lit his perfect face, though worry still lined his forehead. "Heathcliff had his moments, too," he said. He didn't need the book to get it word perfect. He pulled me closer and whispered in my ear, "'I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!'"

"Yes," I said quietly. "That's my point."

"Bella, I can't stand for you to be miserable. Maybe …"

"No, Edward. I've made a real mess of things, and I'm going to have to live with that. But I know what I want and what I need … and what I'm going to do now."

"What are we going to do now?"

I smiled just a bit at his correction, and then I sighed. "We are going to go see Alice."

Alice was on the bottom porch step, too hyper to wait for us inside. She looked about to break into a celebration dance, so excited was she about the news she knew I was there to deliver.

“Thank you, Bella!” she sang as we got out of the truck.

“Hold it, Alice,” I warned her, lifting a hand up to halt her glee. “I’ve got a few limitations for you.”

“I know, I know, I know. I only have until August thirteenth at the latest, you have veto power on the guest list, and if I go overboard on anything, you’ll never speak to me again.”

“Oh, okay. Well, yeah. You know the rules, then.”

“Don’t worry, Bella, it will be perfect. Do you want to see your dress?”

I had to take a few deep breaths. Whatever makes her happy, I said to myself.

“Sure.”

Alice’s smile was smug.

“Um, Alice,” I said, keeping the casual, unruffled tone in my voice. “When did you get me a dress?”

It probably wasn’t much of a show. Edward squeezed my hand.

Alice led the way inside, heading for the stairs. “These things take time, Bella,” Alice explained. Her tone seemed … evasive. “I mean, I wasn’t sure things were going to turn out this way, but there was a distinct possibility… .”

"When?" I asked again.

"Perrine Bruyere has a waiting list, you know," she said, defensive now. "Fabric masterpieces don't happen overnight. If I hadn't thought ahead, you'd be wearing something off the rack!"

It didn't look like I was going to get a straight answer. "Per — who?"

"He's not a major designer, Bella, so there's no need to throw a hissy fit. He's got promise, though, and he specializes in what I needed."

"I'm not throwing a fit."

"No, you're not." She eyed my calm face suspiciously. Then, as we walked into her room, she turned on Edward.

"You — out."

"Why?" I demanded.

"Bella," she groaned. "You know the rules. He's not supposed to see the dress till the day of."

I took another deep breath. "It doesn't matter to me. And you know he's already seen it in your head. But if that's how you want it… ."

She shoved Edward back out the door. He didn't even look at her — his eyes were on me, wary, afraid to leave me alone.

I nodded, hoping my expression was tranquil enough to reassure him.

Alice shut the door in his face.

"All right!" she muttered. "C'mon."

She grabbed my wrist and towed me to her closet — which was bigger than my bedroom — and then dragged me to the back corner, where a long white garment bag had a rack all to itself.

She unzipped the bag in one sweeping movement, and then slipped it carefully off the hanger. She took a step back, holding her hand out to the dress like she was a game show hostess.

"Well?" she asked breathlessly.

I appraised it for a long moment, playing with her a bit. Her expression turned worried.

"Ah," I said, and I smiled, letting her relax. "I see."

"What do you think?" she demanded.

It was my Anne of Green Gables vision all over again.

"It's perfect, of course. Exactly right. You're a genius."

She grinned. "I know."

"Nineteen-eighteen?" I guessed.

"More or less," she said, nodding. "Some of it is my design, the train, the veil... ." She touched the white satin as she spoke. "The lace is vintage. Do you like it?"

"It's beautiful. It's just right for him."

"But is it just right for you?" she insisted.

"Yes, I think it is, Alice. I think it's just what I need. I know you'll do a great job with this ... if you can keep yourself in check."

She beamed.

"Can I see your dress?" I asked.

She blinked, her face blank.

"Didn't you order your bridesmaid dress at the same time? I wouldn't want my maid of honor to wear something off the rack." I pretended to wince in horror.

She threw her arms around my waist. "Thank you, Bella!"

"How could you not see that one coming?" I teased, kissing her spiky hair. "Some psychic you are!"

Alice danced back, and her face was bright with fresh enthusiasm. "I've got so much to do! Go play with Edward. I have to get to work."

She dashed out of the room, yelling, "Esme!" as she disappeared.

I followed at my own pace. Edward was waiting for me in the hallway, leaning against the wood-paneled wall.

"That was very, very nice of you," he told me.

"She seems happy," I agreed.

He touched my face; his eyes — too dark, it had been so long since he'd left me — searched my expression minutely.

"Let's get out of here," he suddenly suggested. "Let's go to our meadow."

It sounded very appealing. "I guess I don't have to hide out anymore, do I?"

"No. The danger is behind us."

He was quiet, thoughtful, as he ran. The wind blew on my face, warmer now that the storm had really passed. The clouds covered the sky, the way they usually did.

The meadow was a peaceful, happy place today. Patches of summer daisies interrupted the grass with splashes of white and yellow. I lay back, ignoring the slight dampness of the ground, and looked for pictures in the clouds. They were too even, too smooth. No pictures, just a soft, gray blanket.

Edward lay next to me and held my hand.

"August thirteenth?" he asked casually after a few minutes of comfortable silence.

"That gives me a month till my birthday. I didn't want to cut it too close."

He sighed. "Esme is three years older than Carlisle — technically. Did you know that?"

I shook my head.

"It hasn't made any difference to them."

My voice was serene, a counterpoint to his anxiety. "My age is not really that important. Edward, I'm ready. I've chosen my life — now I want to start living it."

He stroked my hair. “The guest list veto?”

“I don’t care really, but I ...” I hesitated, not wanting to explain this one. Best to get it over with. “I’m not sure if Alice would feel the need to invite ... a few werewolves. I don’t know if ... Jake would feel like ... like he should come. Like that’s the right thing to do, or that I’d get my feelings hurt if he didn’t. He shouldn’t have to go through that.”

Edward was quiet for a minute. I stared at the tips of the treetops, almost black against the light gray of the sky.

Suddenly, Edward grabbed me around the waist and pulled me onto his chest.

“Tell me why you’re doing this, Bella. Why did you decide, now, to give Alice free reign?”

I repeated for him the conversation I had with Charlie last night before I’d gone to see Jacob.

“It wouldn’t be fair to keep Charlie out of this,” I concluded. “And that means Renée and Phil. I might as well let Alice have her fun, too. Maybe it will make the whole thing easier for Charlie if he gets his proper goodbye. Even if he thinks it’s much too early, I wouldn’t want to cheat him out of the chance to walk me down the aisle.” I grimaced at the words, then took another deep breath. “At least my mom and dad and my friends will know the best part of my choice, the most I’m allowed to tell them. They’ll know I chose you, and they’ll know we’re together. They’ll know I’m happy, wherever I am. I think that’s the best I can do for them.”

Edward held my face, searching it for a brief time.

"Deal's off," he said abruptly.

"What?" I gasped. "You're backing out? No!"

"I'm not backing out, Bella. I'll still keep my side of the bargain. But you're off the hook. Whatever you want, no strings attached."

"Why?"

"Bella, I see what you're doing. You're trying to make everyone else happy. And I don't care about anyone else's feelings. I only need you to be happy. Don't worry about breaking the news to Alice. I'll take care of it. I promise she won't make you feel guilty."

"But I —"

"No. We're doing this your way. Because my way doesn't work. I call you stubborn, but look at what I've done. I've clung with such idiotic obstinacy to my idea of what's best for you, though it's only hurt you. Hurt you so deeply, time and time again. I don't trust myself anymore. You can have happiness your way. My way is always wrong. So." He shifted under me, squaring his shoulders. "We're doing it your way, Bella. Tonight. Today. The sooner the better. I'll speak to Carlisle. I was thinking that maybe if we gave you enough morphine, it wouldn't be so bad. It's worth a try." He gritted his teeth.

"Edward, no —"

He put his finger to my lips. "Don't worry, Bella, love. I haven't forgotten the rest of your demands."

His hands were in my hair, his lips moving softly — but very seriously — against mine, before I realized what he was saying. What he was doing.

There wasn't much time to act. If I waited too long, I wouldn't be able to remember why I needed to stop him. Already, I couldn't breathe right. My hands were gripping his arms, pulling myself tighter to him, my mouth glued to his and answering every unspoken question his asked.

I tried to clear my head, to find a way to speak.

He rolled gently, pressing me into the cool grass.

Oh, never mind! my less noble side exulted. My head was full of the sweetness of his breath.

No, no, no, I argued with myself. I shook my head, and his mouth moved to my neck, giving me a chance to breathe.

"Stop, Edward. Wait." My voice was as weak as my will.

"Why?" he whispered into the hollow of my throat.

I labored to put some resolve into my tone. "I don't want to do this now."

"Don't you?" he asked, a smile in his voice. He moved his lips back to mine and made speaking impossible. Heat coursed through my veins, burning where my skin touched his.

I made myself focus. It took a great deal of effort just to force my hands to free themselves from his hair, to move them to his chest. But I did it. And then I shoved against him, trying to push him away. I could not succeed alone, but he responded as I knew he would.

He pulled back a few inches to look at me, and his eyes did nothing to help my resolve. They were black fire. They smoldered.

“Why?” he asked again, his voice low and rough. “I love you. I want you. Right now.”

The butterflies in my stomach flooded my throat. He took advantage of my speechlessness.

“Wait, wait,” I tried to say around his lips.

“Not for me,” he murmured in disagreement.

“Please?” I gasped.

He groaned, and pushed himself away from me, rolling onto his back again.

We both lay there for a minute, trying to slow our breathing.

“Tell me why not, Bella,” he demanded. “This had better not be about me.”

Everything in my world was about him. What a silly thing to expect.

“Edward, this is very important to me. I am going to do this right.”

“Who’s definition of right?”

“Mine.”

He rolled onto his elbow and stared at me, his expression disapproving.

“How are you going to do this right?”

I took a deep breath. “Responsibly. Everything in the right order. I will not leave Charlie and Renée without the best resolution I can give them. I won’t deny Alice her fun, if I’m having a wedding anyway. And I will tie myself to you in every human way, before I ask you to make me immortal. I’m following all the rules, Edward. Your soul is far, far too important to me to take chances with. You’re not going to budge me on this.”

“I’ll bet I could,” he murmured, his eyes burning again.

“But you wouldn’t,” I said, trying to keep my voice level. “Not knowing that this is what I really need.”

“You don’t fight fair,” he accused.

I grinned at him. “Never said I did.”

He smiled back, wistful. “If you change your mind …”

“You’ll be the first to know,” I promised.

The rain started to drip through the clouds just then, a few scattered drops that made faint thuds as they struck the grass.

I glowered at the sky.

“I’ll get you home.” He brushed the tiny beads of water from my cheeks.

“Rain’s not the problem,” I grumbled. “It just means that it’s time to go do something that will be very unpleasant and possibly even highly dangerous.”

His eyes widened in alarm.

“It’s a good thing you’re bulletproof.” I sighed. “I’m going to need that ring. It’s time to tell Charlie.”

He laughed at the expression on my face. “Highly dangerous,” he agreed. He laughed again and then reached into the pocket of his jeans. “But as least there’s no need for a side trip.”

He once again slid my ring into place on the third finger of my left hand.

Where it would stay — conceivably for the rest of eternity.

# Epilogue

## CHOICE

“Jacob, do you think this is going to take too much longer?” Leah demanded. Impatient. Whiney.

My teeth clenched together.

Like anyone in the pack, Leah knew everything. She knew why I came here — to the very edge of the earth and sky and sea. To be alone. She knew that this was all I wanted. Just to be alone.

But Leah was going to force her company on me, anyway.

Besides being crazy annoyed, I did feel smug for a brief second. Because I didn’t even have to think about controlling my temper. It was easy now, something I just did, natural. The red haze didn’t wash over my eyes. The heat didn’t shiver down my spine. My voice was calm when I answered.

“Jump off a cliff, Leah.” I pointed to the one at my feet.

“Really, kid.” She ignored me, throwing herself into a sprawl on the ground next to me. “You have no idea how hard this is for me.”

“For you?” It took me a minute to believe she was serious. “You have to be the most self-absorbed person alive, Leah. I’d hate to shatter the dream world you live in — the one where the sun is orbiting the place where you stand — so I won’t tell you how little I care what your problem is. Go. Away.”

"Just look at this from my perspective for a minute, okay?" she continued as if I hadn't said anything.

If she was trying to break my mood, it worked. I started laughing. The sound hurt in strange ways.

"Stop snorting and pay attention," she snapped.

"If I pretend to listen, will you leave?" I asked, glancing over at the permanent scowl on her face. I wasn't sure if she had any other expressions anymore.

I remembered back to when I used to think that Leah was pretty, maybe even beautiful. That was a long time ago. No one thought of her that way now. Except for Sam. He was never going to forgive himself. Like it was his fault that she'd turned into this bitter harpy.

Her scowl heated up, as if she could guess what I was thinking. Probably could.

"This is making me sick, Jacob. Can you imagine what this feels like to me? I don't even like Bella Swan. And you've got me grieving over this leech-lover like I'm in love with her, too. Can you see where that might be a little confusing? I dreamed about kissing her last night! What the hell am I supposed to do with that?"

"Do I care?"

"I can't stand being in your head anymore! Get over her already! She's going to marry that thing. He's going to try to change her into one of them! Time to move on, boy."

"Shut up," I growled.

It would be wrong to strike back. I knew that. I was biting my tongue. But she'd be sorry if she didn't walk away. Now.

"He'll probably just kill her anyway," Leah said. Sneering. "All the stories say that happens more often than not. Maybe a funeral will be better closure than a wedding. Ha."

This time I had to work. I closed my eyes and fought the hot taste in my mouth. I pushed and shoved against the slide of fire down my back, wrestling to keep my shape together while my body tried to shake apart.

When I was in control again, I glowered at her. She was watching my hands as the tremors slowed. Smiling.

Some joke.

"If you're upset about gender confusion, Leah … ," I said. Slow, emphasizing each word. "How do you think the rest of us like looking at Sam through your eyes? It's bad enough that Emily has to deal with your fixation. She doesn't need us guys panting after him, too."

Pissed as I was, I still felt guilty when I watched the spasm of pain shoot across her face.

She scrambled to her feet — pausing only to spit in my direction — and ran for the trees, vibrating like a tuning fork.

I laughed darkly. "You missed."

Sam was going to give me hell for that, but it was worth it. Leah wouldn't bug me anymore. And I'd do it again if I had the chance.

Because her words were still there, scratching themselves into my brain, the pain of it so strong that I could hardly breathe.

It didn't matter so much that Bella'd chosen someone else over me. That agony was nothing at all. That agony I could live with for the rest of my stupid, too long, stretched-out life.

But it did matter that she was giving up everything — that she was letting her heart stop and her skin ice over and her mind twist into some crystallized predator's head. A monster. A stranger.

I would have thought there was nothing worse than that, nothing more painful in the whole world.

But, if he killed her …

Again, I had to fight the rage. Maybe, if not for Leah, it would be good to let the heat change me into a creature who could deal with it better. A creature with instincts so much stronger than human emotions. An animal who couldn't feel pain in the same way. A different pain. Some variety, at least. But Leah was running now, and I didn't want to share her thoughts. I cussed her under my breath for taking away that escape, too.

My hands were shaking in spite of me. What shook them? Anger? Agony? I wasn't sure what I was fighting now.

I had to believe that Bella would survive. But that required trust — a trust I didn't want to feel, a trust in that bloodsucker's ability to keep her alive.

She would be different, and I wondered how that would affect me. Would it be the same as if she had died, to see her standing there like a stone? Like ice? When her scent burned in my nostrils and triggered the instinct to rip, to tear … How would that be? Could I want to kill her? Could I not want to kill one of them?

I watched the swells roll toward the beach. They disappeared from sight under the edge of the cliff, but I heard them beat against the sand. I watched them until it was late, long after dark.

Going home was probably a bad idea. But I was hungry, and I couldn't think of another plan.

I made a face as I pulled my arm through the retarded sling and grabbed my crutches. If only Charlie hadn't seen me that day and spread the word of my "motorcycle accident." Stupid props. I hated them.

Going hungry started to look better when I walked in the house and got a look at my dad's face. He had something on his mind. It was easy to tell — he always overdid it. Acted all casual.

He also talked too much. He was rambling about his day before I could get to the table. He never jabbered like this unless there was something that he didn't want to say. I ignored him as best I could, concentrating on the food. The faster I choked it down …

"… and Sue stopped by today." My dad's voice was loud. Hard to ignore. As always. "Amazing woman.

She's tougher than grizzlies, that one. I don't know how she deals with that daughter of hers, though. Now Sue, she would have made one hell of a wolf. Leah's more of a wolverine." He chuckled at his own joke.

He waited briefly for my response, but didn't seem to see my blank, bored-out-of-my-mind expression. Most days that bugged him. I wished he would shut up about Leah. I was trying not to think about her.

"Seth's a lot easier. Of course, you were easier than your sisters, too, until … well, you have more to deal with than they did."

I sighed, long and deep, and stared out the window.

Billy was quiet for a second too long. "We got a letter today."

I could tell that this was the subject he'd been avoiding.

"A letter?"

"A … wedding invitation."

Every muscle in my body locked into place. A feather of heat seemed to brush down my back. I held onto the table to keep my hands steady.

Billy went on like he hadn't noticed. "There's a note inside that's addressed to you. I didn't read it."

He pulled a thick ivory envelope from where it was wedged between his leg and the side of his wheelchair. He laid it on the table between us.

"You probably don't need to read it. Doesn't really matter what it says."

Stupid reverse psychology. I yanked the envelope off the table.

It was some heavy, stiff paper. Expensive. Too fancy for Forks. The card inside was the same, too done-up and formal. Bella'd had nothing to do with this. There was no sign of her personal taste in the layers of see-through, petal-printed pages. I'd bet she didn't like it at all. I didn't read the words, not even to see the date. I didn't care.

There was a piece of the thick ivory paper folded in half with my name handwritten in black ink on the back. I didn't recognize the handwriting, but it was as fancy as the rest of it. For half a second, I wondered if the bloodsucker was into gloating.

I flipped it open.

*Jacob,*

*I'm breaking th rules by sending you this. She was afraid of hurting you, and she didn't want to make you feel obligated in any way. But I know that, if things had gone the other way, I would have wanted the choice.*

*I promise I will take care of her, Jacob. Thank You - for her - for everything.*

*Edward*

“Jake, we only have the one table,” Billy said. He was staring at my left hand.

My fingers were clamped down on the wood hard enough that it really was in danger. I loosened them one by one, concentrating on that action alone, and then clenched my hands together so I couldn’t break anything.

“Yeah, doesn’t matter anyway,” Billy muttered.

I got up from the table, shrugging out of my t-shirt as I stood. Hopefully Leah had gone home by now.

“Not too late,” Billy mumbled as I punched the front door out of my way.

I was running before I hit the trees, my clothes strewn out behind me like a trail of crumbs — as if I wanted to find my way back. It was almost too easy now to phase. I didn’t have to think. My body already knew where I was going and, before I asked it to, it gave me what I wanted.

I had four legs now, and I was flying.

The trees blurred into a sea of black flowing around me. My muscles bunched and released in an effortless rhythm. I could run like this for days and I would not be tired. Maybe, this time, I wouldn’t stop.

But I wasn’t alone.

So sorry, Embry whispered in my head.

I could see through his eyes. He was far away, to the north, but he had wheeled around and was racing to join me. I growled and pushed myself faster.

Wait for us, Quil complained. He was closer, just starting out from the village.

Leave me alone, I snarled.

I could feel their worry in my head, try hard as I might to drown it in the sound of the wind and the forest. This was what I hated most — seeing myself through their eyes, worse now that their eyes were full of pity. They saw the hate, but they kept running after me.

A new voice sounded in my head.

Let him go. Sam's thought was soft, but still an order. Embry and Quil slowed to a walk.

If only I could stop hearing, stop seeing what they saw. My head was so crowded, but the only way to be alone again was to be human, and I couldn't stand the pain.

Phase back, Sam directed them. I'll pick you up, Embry.

First one, then another awareness faded into silence. Only Sam was left.

Thank you, I managed to think.

Come home when you can. The words were faint, trailing off into blank emptiness as he left, too. And I was alone.

So much better. Now I could hear the faint rustle of the matted leaves beneath my toenails, the whisper of an owl's wings above me, the ocean — far, far in the west — moaning against the beach. Hear this, and nothing more. Feel nothing but speed, nothing but

the pull of muscle, sinew, and bone, working together in harmony as the miles disappeared behind me.

If the silence in my head lasted, I would never go back. I wouldn't be the first one to choose this form over the other. Maybe, if I ran far enough away, I would never have to hear again… .

I pushed my legs faster, letting Jacob Black disappear behind me.


breaking dawn
STEPHENIE MEYER
AUTHOR OF THE #1 BESTSELLING TWILIGHT, NEW MOON, AND ECLIPSE

# Preface

I'd had more than my fair share of near-death experiences; it wasn't something you ever really got used to.

It seemed oddly inevitable, though, facing death again. Like I really was marked for disaster. I'd escaped time and time again, but it kept coming back for me. Still, this time was so different from the others.

You could run from someone you feared, you could try to fight someone you hated. All my reactions were geared toward those kinds of killers—the monsters, the enemies. When you loved the one who was killing you, it left you no options. How could you run, how could you fight, when doing so would hurt that beloved one? If your life was all you had to give your beloved, how could you not give it?

If it was someone you truly loved?

# Chapter 1

## ENGAGED

No one is staring at you, I promised myself. No one is staring at you. No one is staring at you.

But, because I couldn't lie convincingly even to myself, I had to check. As I sat waiting for one of the three traffic lights in town to turn green, I peeked to the right—in her minivan, Mrs. Weber had turned her whole torso in my direction. Her eyes bored into mine, and I flinched back, wondering why she didn't drop her gaze or look ashamed. It was still considered rude to stare at people, wasn't it? Didn't that apply to me anymore?

Then I remembered that these windows were so darkly tinted that she probably had no idea if it was even me in here, let alone that I'd caught her looking. I tried to take some comfort in the fact that she wasn't really staring at me, just the car. My car. Sigh.

I glanced to the left and groaned. Two pedestrians were frozen on the sidewalk, missing their chance to cross as they stared. Behind them, Mr. Marshall was gawking through the plate-glass window of his little souvenir shop. At least he didn't have his nose pressed up against the glass. Yet.

The light turned green and, in my hurry to escape, I stomped on the gas pedal without thinking—the normal way I would have punched it to get my ancient Chevy truck moving.

Engine snarling like a hunting panther, the car jolted forward so fast that my body slammed into the black leather seat and my stomach flattened against my spine.

"Arg!" I gasped as I fumbled for the brake. Keeping my head, I merely tapped the pedal. The car lurched to an absolute standstill anyway.

I couldn't bear to look around at the reaction. If there had been any doubt as to who was driving this car before, it was gone now. With the toe of my shoe, I gently nudged the gas pedal down one half millimeter, and the car shot forward again. I managed to reach my goal, the gas station. If I hadn't been running on vapors, I wouldn't have come into town at all. I was going without a lot of things these days, like Pop-Tarts and shoelaces, to avoid spending time in public.

Moving as if I were in a race, I got the hatch open, the cap off, the card scanned, and the nozzle in the tank within seconds. Of course, there was nothing I could do to make the numbers on the gauge pick up the pace. They ticked by sluggishly, almost as if they were doing it just to annoy me.

It wasn't bright out—a typical drizzly day in Forks, Washington—but I still felt like a spotlight was trained on me, drawing attention to the delicate ring on my left hand. At times like this, sensing the eyes on my back, it felt as if the ring were pulsing like a neon sign: Look at me, look at me.

It was stupid to be so self-conscious, and I knew that. Besides my dad and mom, did it really matter what

people were saying about my engagement? About my new car?

About my mysterious acceptance into an Ivy League college? About the shiny black credit card that felt red-hot in my back pocket right now?

“Yeah, who cares what they think,” I muttered under my breath.

“Um, miss?” a man’s voice called.

I turned, and then wished I hadn’t.

Two men stood beside a fancy SUV with brand-new kayaks tied to the top. Neither of them was looking at me; they both were staring at the car.

Personally, I didn’t get it. But then, I was just proud I could distinguish between the symbols for Toyota, Ford, and Chevy. This car was glossy black, sleek, and pretty, but it was still just a car to me.

“I’m sorry to bother you, but could you tell me what kind of car you’re driving?” the tall one asked.

“Um, a Mercedes, right?”

“Yes,” the man said politely while his shorter friend rolled his eyes at my answer. “I know. But I was wondering, is that… are you driving a Mercedes Guardian?” The man said the name with reverence. I had a feeling this guy would get along well with Edward Cullen, my… my fiancé (there really was no getting around that truth with the wedding just days away). “They aren’t supposed to be available in Europe yet,” the man went on,

"let alone here."

While his eyes traced the contours of my car—it didn't look much different from any other Mercedes sedan to me, but what did I know?—I briefly contemplated my issues with words like fiancé, wedding, husband, etc. I just couldn't put it together in my head.

On the one hand, I had been raised to cringe at the very thought of poofy white dresses and bouquets. But more than that, I just couldn't reconcile a staid, respectable, dull concept like husband with my concept of Edward. It was like casting an archangel as an accountant; I couldn't visualize him in any commonplace role.

Like always, as soon as I started thinking about Edward I was caught up in a dizzy spin of fantasies. The stranger had to clear his throat to get my attention; he was still waiting for an answer about the car's make and model.

"I don't know," I told him honestly.

"Do you mind if I take a picture with it?"

It took me a second to process that. "Really? You want to take a picture with the car?"

"Sure—nobody is going to believe me if I don't get proof."

"Um. Okay. Fine."

I swiftly put away the nozzle and crept into the front seat to hide while the enthusiast dug a huge professional-looking camera out of his backpack. He

and his friend took turns posing by the hood, and then they went to take pictures at the back end.

“I miss my truck,” I whimpered to myself.

Very, very convenient—too convenient—that my truck would wheeze its last wheeze just weeks after Edward and I had agreed to our lopsided compromise, one detail of which was that he be allowed to replace my truck when it passed on. Edward swore it was only to be expected; my truck had lived a long, full life and then expired of natural causes. According to him. And, of course, I had no way to verify his story or to try to raise my truck from the dead on my own. My favorite mechanic—

I stopped that thought cold, refusing to let it come to a conclusion. Instead, I listened to the men’s voices outside, muted by the car walls.

“. . . went at it with a flamethrower in the online video. Didn’t even pucker the paint.”

“Of course not. You could roll a tank over this baby. Not much of a market for one over here. Designed for Middle East diplomats, arms dealers, and drug lords mostly.”

“Think she’s something?” the short one asked in a softer voice. I ducked my head, cheeks flaming.

“Huh,” the tall one said. “Maybe. Can’t imagine what you’d need missile-proof glass and four thousand pounds of body armor for around here. Must be headed somewhere more hazardous.”

Body armor. Four thousand pounds of body armor. And missile-proof glass? Nice. What had happened to good old-fashioned bulletproof?

Well, at least this made some sense—if you had a twisted sense of humor. It wasn't like I hadn't expected Edward to take advantage of our deal, to weight it on his side so that he could give so much more than he would receive. I'd agreed that he could replace my truck when it needed replacing, not expecting that moment to come quite so soon, of course. When I'd been forced to admit that the truck had become no more than a still-life tribute to classic Chevys on my curb, I knew his idea of a replacement was probably going to embarrass me. Make me the focus of stares and whispers. I'd been right about that part. But even in my darkest imaginings I had not foreseen that he would get me two cars.

The "before" car and the "after" car, he'd explained when I'd flipped out. This was just the "before" car. He'd told me it was a loaner and promised that he was returning it after the wedding. It all had made absolutely no sense to me. Until now. Ha ha. Because I was so fragilely human, so accident-prone, so much a victim to my own dangerous bad luck, apparently I needed a tank-resistant car to keep me safe. Hilarious. I was sure he and his brothers had enjoyed the joke quite a bit behind my back.

Or maybe, just maybe, a small voice whispered in my head, it's not a joke, silly. Maybe he's really that worried about you. This wouldn't be the first time he's gone a little overboard trying to protect you.

I sighed.

I hadn't seen the "after" car yet. It was hidden under a sheet in the deepest corner of the Cullens' garage. I knew most people would have peeked by now, but I really didn't want to know.

Probably no body armor on that car—because I wouldn't need it after the honeymoon. Virtual indestructibility was just one of the many perks I was looking forward to. The best parts about being a Cullen were not expensive cars and impressive credit cards.

"Hey," the tall man called, cupping his hands to the glass in an effort to peer in. "We're done now. Thanks a lot!"

"You're welcome," I called back, and then tensed as I started the engine and eased the pedal—ever so gently—down. . . .

No matter how many times I drove down the familiar road home, I still couldn't make the rain-faded flyers fade into the background. Each one of them, stapled to telephone poles and taped to street signs, was like a fresh slap in the face. A well-deserved slap in the face. My mind was sucked back into the thought I'd interrupted so immediately before. I couldn't avoid it on this road. Not with pictures of my favorite mechanic flashing past me at regular intervals.

My best friend. My Jacob.

The HAVE YOU SEEN THIS BOY? posters were not Jacob's father's idea. It had been my father, Charlie,

who'd printed up the flyers and spread them all over town. And not just Forks, but Port Angeles and Sequim and Hoquiam and Aberdeen and every other town in the Olympic Peninsula. He'd made sure that all the police stations in the state of Washington had the same flyer hanging on the wall, too. His own station had a whole corkboard dedicated to finding Jacob. A corkboard that was mostly empty, much to his disappointment and frustration.

My dad was disappointed with more than the lack of response. He was most disappointed with Billy, Jacob's father—and Charlie's closest friend. For Billy's not being more involved with the search for his sixteen-year-old "runaway."

For Billy's refusing to put up the flyers in La Push, the reservation on the coast that was Jacob's home. For his seeming resigned to Jacob's disappearance, as if there was nothing he could do. For his saying, "Jacob's grown up now. He'll come home if he wants to."

And he was frustrated with me, for taking Billy's side.

I wouldn't put up posters, either. Because both Billy and I knew where Jacob was, roughly speaking, and we also knew that no one had seen this boy. The flyers put the usual big, fat lump in my throat, the usual stinging tears in my eyes, and I was glad Edward was out hunting this Saturday. If Edward saw my reaction, it would only make him feel terrible, too.

Of course, there were drawbacks to it being Saturday. As I turned slowly and carefully onto my street, I

could see my dad's police cruiser in the driveway of our home. He'd skipped fishing again today. Still sulking about the wedding.

So I wouldn't be able to use the phone inside. But I had to call. . . . I parked on the curb behind the Chevy sculpture and pulled the cell phone Edward had given me for emergencies out of the glove compartment. I dialed, keeping my finger on the "end" button as the phone rang. Just in case.

"Hello?" Seth Clearwater answered, and I sighed in relief. I was way too chicken to speak to his older sister, Leah. The phrase "bite my head off" was not entirely a figure of speech when it came to Leah.

"Hey, Seth, it's Bella."

"Oh, hiya, Bella! How are you?"

Choked up. Desperate for reassurance. "Fine."

"Calling for an update?"

"You're psychic."

"Not hardly. I'm no Alice—you're just predictable," he joked. Among the Quileute pack down at La Push, only Seth was comfortable even mentioning the Cullens by name, let alone joking about things like my nearly omniscient sister-in-law-to-be.

"I know I am." I hesitated for a minute. "How is he?"

Seth sighed. "Same as ever. He won't talk, though we know he hears us. He's trying not to think human, you know. Just going with his instincts."

"Do you know where he is now?"

"Somewhere in northern Canada. I can't tell you which province. He doesn't pay much attention to state lines."

"Any hint that he might . . ."

"He's not coming home, Bella. Sorry."

I swallowed. "S'okay, Seth. I knew before I asked. I just can't help wishing."

"Yeah. We all feel the same way."

"Thanks for putting up with me, Seth. I know the others must give you a hard time."

"They're not your hugest fans," he agreed cheerfully. "Kind of lame, I think. Jacob made his choices, you made yours. Jake doesn't like their attitude about it. 'Course, he isn't super thrilled that you're checking up on him, either."

I gasped. "I thought he wasn't talking to you?"

"He can't hide everything from us, hard as he's trying."

So Jacob knew I was worried. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. Well, at least he knew I hadn't skipped off into the sunset and forgotten him completely. He might have imagined me capable of that.

"I guess I'll see you at the… wedding," I said, forcing the word out through my teeth.

“Yeah, me and my mom will be there. It was cool of you to ask us.”

I smiled at the enthusiasm in his voice. Though inviting the Clearwaters had been Edward’s idea, I was glad he’d thought of it. Having Seth there would be nice—a link, however tenuous, to my missing best man. “It wouldn’t be the same without you.”

“Tell Edward I said hi, ’kay?”

“Sure thing.”

I shook my head. The friendship that had sprung up between Edward and Seth was something that still boggled my mind. It was proof, though, that things didn’t have to be this way. That vampires and werewolves could get along just fine, thank you very much, if they were of a mind to.

Not everybody liked this idea.

“Ah,” Seth said, his voice cracking up an octave. “Er, Leah’s home.”

“Oh! Bye!”

The phone went dead. I left it on the seat and prepared myself mentally to go inside the house, where Charlie would be waiting.

My poor dad had so much to deal with right now. Jacob-the-runaway was just one of the straws on his overburdened back. He was almost as worried about me, his barely-alegal-adult daughter who was about to become a Mrs. in just a few days’ time. I walked slowly through the light rain, remembering the night

we'd told him. . . . As the sound of Charlie's cruiser announced his return, the ring suddenly weighed a hundred pounds on my finger. I wanted to shove my left hand in a pocket, or maybe sit on it, but Edward's cool, firm grasp kept it front and center.

"Stop fidgeting, Bella. Please try to remember that you're not confessing to a murder here."

"Easy for you to say."

I listened to the ominous sound of my father's boots clomping up the sidewalk. The key rattled in the already open door. The sound reminded me of that part of the horror movie when the victim realizes she's forgotten to lock her deadbolt.

"Calm down, Bella," Edward whispered, listening to the acceleration of my heart. The door slammed against the wall, and I flinched like I'd been Tasered.

"Hey, Charlie," Edward called, entirely relaxed.

"No!" I protested under my breath.

"What?" Edward whispered back.

"Wait till he hangs his gun up!"

Edward chuckled and ran his free hand through his tousled bronze hair. Charlie came around the corner, still in his uniform, still armed, and tried not to make a face when he spied us sitting together on the loveseat. Lately, he'd been putting forth a lot of effort to like Edward more. Of course, this revelation was sure to end that effort immediately.

"Hey, kids. What's up?"

"We'd like to talk to you," Edward said, so serene. "We have some good news."

Charlie's expression went from strained friendliness to black suspicion in a second.

"Good news?" Charlie growled, looking straight at me.

"Have a seat, Dad."

He raised one eyebrow, stared at me for five seconds, then stomped to the recliner and sat down on the very edge, his back ramrod straight.

"Don't get worked up, Dad," I said after a moment of loaded silence. "Everything's okay."

Edward grimaced, and I knew it was in objection to the word okay. He probably would have used something more like wonderful or perfect or glorious.

"Sure it is, Bella, sure it is. If everything is so great, then why are you sweating bullets?"

"I'm not sweating," I lied.

I leaned away from his fierce scowl, cringing into Edward, and instinctively wiped the back of my right hand across my forehead to remove the evidence.

"You're pregnant!" Charlie exploded. "You're pregnant, aren't you?"

Though the question was clearly meant for me, he was glaring at Edward now, and I could have sworn I saw his hand twitch toward the gun.

"No! Of course I'm not!" I wanted to elbow Edward in the ribs, but I knew that move would only give me a bruise. I'd told Edward that people would immediately jump to this conclusion! What other possible reason would sane people have for getting married at eighteen? (His answer then had made me roll my eyes. Love. Right.) Charlie's glower lightened a shade. It was usually pretty clear on my face when I was telling the truth, and he believed me now. "Oh. Sorry."

"Apology accepted."

There was a long pause. After a moment, I realized everyone was waiting for me to say something. I looked up at Edward, panic-stricken. There was no way I was going to get the words out.

He smiled at me and then squared his shoulders and turned to my father.

"Charlie, I realize that I've gone about this out of order. Traditionally, I should have asked you first. I mean no disrespect, but since Bella has already said yes and I don't want to diminish her choice in the matter, instead of asking you for her hand, I'm asking you for your blessing. We're getting married, Charlie. I love her more than anything in the world, more than my own life, and—by some miracle—she loves me that way, too. Will you give us your blessing?"

He sounded so sure, so calm. For just an instant, listening to the absolute confidence in his voice, I experienced a rare moment of insight. I could see, fleetingly, the way the world looked to him. For the length of one heartbeat, this news made perfect

sense. And then I caught sight of the expression on Charlie's face, his eyes now locked on the ring.

I held my breath while his skin changed colors—fair to red, red to purple, purple to blue. I started to get up—I'm not sure what I planned to do; maybe use the Heimlich maneuver to make sure he wasn't choking—but Edward squeezed my hand and murmured "Give him a minute" so low that only I could hear.

The silence was much longer this time. Then, gradually, shade by shade, Charlie's color returned to normal. His lips pursed, and his eyebrows furrowed; I recognized his "deep in thought" expression. He studied the two of us for a long moment, and I felt Edward relax at my side.

"Guess I'm not that surprised," Charlie grumbled. "Knew I'd have to deal with something like this soon enough."

I exhaled.

"You sure about this?" Charlie demanded, glaring at me.

"I'm one hundred percent sure about Edward," I told him without missing a beat.

"Getting married, though? What's the rush?" He eyed me suspiciously again. The rush was due to the fact that I was getting closer to nineteen every stinking day, while Edward stayed frozen in all his seventeen-year-old perfection, as he had for over ninety years. Not that this fact necessitated marriage in my book, but the wedding was required due to the delicate and

tangled compromise Edward and I had made to finally get to this point, the brink of my transformation from mortal to immortal. These weren't things I could explain to Charlie.

"We're going away to Dartmouth together in the fall, Charlie," Edward reminded him.

"I'd like to do that, well, the right way. It's how I was raised." He shrugged. He wasn't exaggerating; they'd been big on old-fashioned morals during World War I. Charlie's mouth twisted to the side. Looking for an angle to argue from. But what could he say? I'd prefer you live in sin first? He was a dad; his hands were tied.

"Knew this was coming," he muttered to himself, frowning. Then, suddenly, his face went perfectly smooth and blank.

"Dad?" I asked anxiously. I glanced at Edward, but I couldn't read his face, either, as he watched Charlie.

"Ha!" Charlie exploded. I jumped in my seat. "Ha, ha, ha!"

I stared incredulously as Charlie doubled over in laughter; his whole body shook with it. I looked at Edward for a translation, but Edward had his lips pressed tightly together, like he was trying to hold back laughter himself.

"Okay, fine," Charlie choked out. "Get married." Another roll of laughter shook through him. "But . . ."

"But what?" I demanded.

"But you have to tell your mom! I'm not saying one word to Renée! That's all yours!"

He busted into loud guffaws.

I paused with my hand on the doorknob, smiling. Sure, at the time, Charlie's words had terrified me. The ultimate doom: telling Renée. Early marriage was higher up on her blacklist than boiling live puppies.

Who could have foreseen her response? Not me. Certainly not Charlie. Maybe Alice, but I hadn't thought to ask her.

"Well, Bella," Renée had said after I'd choked and stuttered out the impossible words: Mom, I'm marrying Edward. "I'm a little miffed that you waited so long to tell me. Plane tickets only get more expensive. Oooh," she'd fretted. "Do you think Phil's cast will be off by then? It will spoil the pictures if he's not in a tux—"

"Back up a second, Mom." I'd gasped. "What do you mean, waited so long? I just got en-en . . ."—I'd been unable to force out the word engaged—"things settled, you know, today."

"Today? Really? That is a surprise. I assumed . . ."

"What did you assume? When did you assume?"

"Well, when you came to visit me in April, it looked like things were pretty much sewn up, if you know what I mean. You're not very hard to read, sweetie. But I didn't say anything because I knew it wouldn't do any good. You're exactly like Charlie." She'd sighed, resigned. "Once you make up your mind,

there is no reasoning with you. Of course, exactly like Charlie, you stick by your decisions, too."

And then she'd said the last thing that I'd ever expected to hear from my mother.

"You're not making my mistakes, Bella. You sound like you're scared silly, and I'm guessing it's because you're afraid of me." She'd giggled. "Of what I'm going to think. And I know I've said a lot of things about marriage and stupidity—and I'm not taking them back—but you need to realize that those things specifically applied to me. You're a completely different person than I am. You make your own kinds of mistakes, and I'm sure you'll have your share of regrets in life. But commitment was never your problem, sweetie. You have a better chance of making this work than most forty-year-olds I know." Renée had laughed again. "My little middle-aged child. Luckily, you seem to have found another old soul."

"You're not… mad? You don't think I'm making a humongous mistake?"

"Well, sure, I wish you'd wait a few more years. I mean, do I look old enough to be a mother-in-law to you? Don't answer that. But this isn't about me. This is about you. Are you happy?"

"I don't know. I'm having an out-of-body experience right now."

Renée had chuckled. "Does he make you happy, Bella?"

"Yes, but—"

“Are you ever going to want anyone else?”

“No, but—”

“But what?”

“But aren’t you going to say that I sound exactly like every other infatuated teenager since the dawn of time?”

“You’ve never been a teenager, sweetie. You know what’s best for you.”

For the last few weeks, Renée had unexpectedly immersed herself in wedding plans. She’d spent hours every day on the phone with Edward’s mother, Esme—no worries about the in-laws getting along. Renée adored Esme, but then, I doubted anyone could help responding that way to my lovable almost-mother-in-law.

It let me right off the hook. Edward’s family and my family were taking care of the nuptials together without my having to do or know or think too hard about any of it. Charlie was furious, of course, but the sweet part was that he wasn’t furious at me. Renée was the traitor. He’d counted on her to play the heavy. What could he do now, when his ultimate threat—telling Mom—had turned out to be utterly empty? He had nothing, and he knew it. So he moped around the house, muttering things about not being able to trust anyone in this world. . . .

“Dad?” I called as I pushed open the front door. “I’m home.”

“Hold on, Bells, stay right there.”

"Huh?" I asked, pausing automatically.

"Gimme a second. Ouch, you got me, Alice."

Alice?

"Sorry, Charlie," Alice's trilling voice responded. "How's that?"

"I'm bleeding on it."

"You're fine. Didn't break the skin—trust me."

"What's going on?" I demanded, hesitating in the doorway.

"Thirty seconds, please, Bella," Alice told me. "Your patience will be rewarded."

"Humph," Charlie added.

I tapped my foot, counting each beat. Before I got to thirty, Alice said, "Okay, Bella, come in!"

Moving with caution, I rounded the little corner into our living room.

"Oh," I huffed. "Aw. Dad. Don't you look—"

"Silly?" Charlie interrupted.

"I was thinking more like debonair. "

Charlie blushed. Alice took his elbow and tugged him around into a slow spin to showcase the pale gray tux.

"Now cut that out, Alice. I look like an idiot."

"No one dressed by me ever looks like an idiot."

"She's right, Dad. You look fabulous! What's the occasion?"

Alice rolled her eyes. "It's the final check on the fit. For both of you."

I peeled my gaze off the unusually elegant Charlie for the first time and saw the dreaded white garment bag laid carefully across the sofa.

"Aaah."

"Go to your happy place, Bella. It won't take long."

I sucked in a deep breath and closed my eyes. Keeping them shut, I stumbled my way up the stairs to my room. I stripped down to my underwear and held my arms straight out.

"You'd think I was shoving bamboo splinters under your nails," Alice muttered to herself as she followed me in.

I paid no attention to her. I was in my happy place.

In my happy place, the whole wedding mess was over and done. Behind me. Already repressed and forgotten.

We were alone, just Edward and me. The setting was fuzzy and constantly in flux—it morphed from misty forest to cloud-covered city to arctic night—because Edward was keeping the location of our honeymoon a secret to surprise me. But I wasn't especially concerned about the where part.

Edward and I were together, and I'd fulfilled my side of our compromise perfectly. I'd married him. That was the big one. But I'd also accepted all his outrageous gifts and was registered, however futilely, to attend Dartmouth College in the fall. Now it was his turn.

Before he turned me into a vampire—his big compromise—he had one other stipulation to make good on.

Edward had an obsessive sort of concern over the human things that I would be giving up, the experiences he didn't want me to miss. Most of them—like the prom, for example—seemed silly to me. There was only one human experience I worried about missing. Of course it would be the one he wished I would forget completely. Here was the thing, though. I knew a little about what I was going to be like when I wasn't human anymore. I'd seen newborn vampires firsthand, and I'd heard all my family-to-be's stories about those wild early days. For several years, my biggest personality trait was going to be thirsty. It would take some time before I could be me again. And even when I was in control of myself, I would never feel exactly the way I felt now.

Human… and passionately in love.

I wanted the complete experience before I traded in my warm, breakable, pheromoneriddled body for something beautiful, strong… and unknown. I wanted a real honeymoon with Edward. And, despite the danger he feared this would put me in, he'd agreed to try.

I was only vaguely aware of Alice and the slip and slide of satin over my skin. I didn't care, for the moment, that the whole town was talking about me. I didn't think about the spectacle I would have to star in much too soon. I didn't worry about tripping on my train or giggling at the wrong moment or being too young or the staring audience or even the empty seat where my best friend should be.

I was with Edward in my happy place.

# Chapter 2

## LONG NIGHT

“I miss you already.”

“I don’t need to leave. I can stay. . . .”

“Mmm.”

It was quiet for a long moment, just the thud of my heart hammering, the broken rhythm of our ragged breathing, and the whisper of our lips moving in synchronization. Sometimes it was so easy to forget that I was kissing a vampire. Not because he seemed ordinary or human—I could never for a second forget that I was holding someone more angel than man in my arms—but because he made it seem like nothing at all to have his lips against my lips, my face, my throat. He claimed he was long past the temptation my blood used to be for him, that the idea of losing me had cured him of any desire for it. But I knew the smell of my blood still caused him pain—still burned his throat like he was inhaling flames.

I opened my eyes and found his open, too, staring at my face. It made no sense when he looked at me that way. Like I was the prize rather than the outrageously lucky winner. Our gazes locked for a moment; his golden eyes were so deep that I imagined I could see all the way into his soul. It seemed silly that this fact—the existence of his soul—

had ever been in question, even if he was a vampire. He had the most beautiful soul, more beautiful than

his brilliant mind or his incomparable face or his glorious body. He looked back at me as if he could see my soul, too, and as if he liked what he saw. He couldn't see into my mind, though, the way he saw into everyone else's. Who knew why—some strange glitch in my brain that made it immune to all the extraordinary and frightening things some immortals could do. (Only my mind was immune; my body was still subject to vampires with abilities that worked in ways other than Edward's.) But I was seriously grateful to whatever malfunction it was that kept my thoughts a secret. It was just too embarrassing to consider the alternative.

I pulled his face to mine again.

"Definitely staying," he murmured a moment later.

"No, no. It's your bachelor party. You have to go."

I said the words, but the fingers of my right hand locked into his bronze hair, my left pressed tighter against the small of his back. His cool hands stroked my face.

"Bachelor parties are designed for those who are sad to see the passing of their single days. I couldn't be more eager to have mine behind me. So there's really no point."

"True." I breathed against the winter-cold skin of his throat.

This was pretty close to my happy place. Charlie slept obliviously in his room, which was almost as good as being alone. We were curled up on my small bed,

intertwined as much as it was possible, considering the thick afghan I was swathed in like a cocoon. I hated the necessity of the blanket, but it sort of ruined the romance when my teeth started chattering. Charlie would notice if I turned the heat on in August. . . . At least, if I had to be bundled up, Edward's shirt was on the floor. I never got over the shock of how perfect his body was—white, cool, and polished as marble. I ran my hand down his stone chest now, tracing across the flat planes of his stomach, just marveling. A light shudder rippled through him, and his mouth found mine again. Carefully, I let the tip of my tongue press against his glass-smooth lip, and he sighed. His sweet breath washed—cold and delicious—over my face.

He started to pull away—that was his automatic response whenever he decided things had gone too far, his reflex reaction whenever he most wanted to keep going. Edward had spent most of his life rejecting any kind of physical gratification. I knew it was terrifying to him trying to change those habits now.

"Wait," I said, gripping his shoulders and hugging myself close to him. I kicked one leg free and wrapped it around his waist. "Practice makes perfect."

He chuckled. "Well, we should be fairly close to perfection by this point, then, shouldn't we? Have you slept at all in the last month?"

"But this is the dress rehearsal," I reminded him, "and we've only practiced certain scenes. It's no time for playing safe."

I thought he would laugh, but he didn't answer, and his body was motionless with sudden stress. The gold in his eyes seemed to harden from a liquid to a solid. I thought over my words, realized what he would have heard in them.

"Bella...," he whispered.

"Don't start this again," I said. "A deal's a deal."

"I don't know. It's too hard to concentrate when you're with me like this. I—I can't think straight. I won't be able to control myself. You'll get hurt."

"I'll be fine."

"Bella . . ."

"Shh!" I pressed my lips to his to stop his panic attack. I'd heard it before. He wasn't getting out of this deal. Not after insisting I marry him first. He kissed me back for a moment, but I could tell he wasn't as into it as before. Worrying, always worrying. How different it would be when he didn't need to worry about me anymore. What would he do with all his free time? He'd have to get a new hobby.

"How are your feet?" he asked.

Knowing he didn't mean that literally, I answered, "Toasty warm."

"Really? No second thoughts? It's not too late to change your mind."

"Are you trying to ditch me?"

He chuckled. “Just making sure. I don’t want you to do anything you’re not sure about.”

“I’m sure about you. The rest I can live through.”

He hesitated, and I wondered if I’d put my foot in my mouth again.

“Can you?” he asked quietly. “I don’t mean the wedding—which I am positive you will survive despite your qualms—but afterward… what about Renée, what about Charlie?”

I sighed. “I’ll miss them.” Worse, that they would miss me, but I didn’t want to give him any fuel.

“Angela and Ben and Jessica and Mike.”

“I’ll miss my friends, too.” I smiled in the darkness. “Especially Mike. Oh, Mike! How will I go on?”

He growled.

I laughed but then was serious. “Edward, we’ve been through this and through this. I know it will be hard, but this is what I want. I want you, and I want you forever. One lifetime is simply not enough for me.”

“Frozen forever at eighteen,” he whispered.

“Every woman’s dream come true,” I teased.

“Never changing… never moving forward.”

“What does that mean?”

He answered slowly. “Do you remember when we told Charlie we were getting married? And he thought you were… pregnant?”

"And he thought about shooting you," I guessed with a laugh. "Admit it—for one second, he honestly considered it."

He didn't answer.

"What, Edward?"

"I just wish… well, I wish that he'd been right."

"Gah," I gasped.

"More that there was some way he could have been. That we had that kind of potential. I hate taking that away from you, too."

It took me a minute. "I know what I'm doing."

"How could you know that, Bella? Look at my mother, look at my sister. It's not as easy a sacrifice as you imagine."

"Esme and Rosalie get by just fine. If it's a problem later, we can do what Esme did—

we'll adopt."

He sighed, and then his voice was fierce. "It's not right! I don't want you to have to make sacrifices for me. I want to give you things, not take things away from you. I don't want to steal your future. If I were human—"

I put my hand over his lips. "You are my future. Now stop. No moping, or I'm calling your brothers to come and get you. Maybe you need a bachelor party."

"I'm sorry. I am moping, aren't I? Must be the nerves."

"Are your feet cold?"

"Not in that sense. I've been waiting a century to marry you, Miss Swan. The wedding ceremony is the one thing I can't wait—" He broke off mid-thought. "Oh, for the love of all that's holy!"

"What's wrong?"

He gritted his teeth. "You don't have to call my brothers. Apparently Emmett and Jasper are not going to let me bow out tonight."

I clutched him closer for one second and then released him. I didn't have a prayer of winning a tug-of-war with Emmett. "Have fun."

There was a squeal against the window—someone deliberately scraping their steel nails across the glass to make a horrible, cover-your-ears, goose-bumps-down-your-spine noise. I shuddered.

"If you don't send Edward out," Emmett—still invisible in the night—hissed menacingly, "we're coming in after him!"

"Go," I laughed. "Before they break my house."

Edward rolled his eyes, but he got to his feet in one fluid movement and had his shirt back on in another. He leaned down and kissed my forehead.

"Get to sleep. You've got a big day tomorrow."

"Thanks! That's sure to help me wind down."

"I'll meet you at the altar."

"I'll be the one in white." I smiled at how perfectly blasé I sounded. He chuckled, said, "Very convincing," and then suddenly sank into a crouch, his muscles coiled like a spring. He vanished—launching himself out my window too swiftly for my eyes to follow.

Outside, there was a muted thud, and I heard Emmett curse.

"You'd better not make him late," I murmured, knowing they could hear. And then Jasper's face was peering in my window, his honey hair silver in the weak moonlight that worked through the clouds.

"Don't worry, Bella. We'll get him home in plenty of time."

I was suddenly very calm, and my qualms all seemed unimportant. Jasper was, in his own way, just as talented as Alice with her uncannily accurate predictions. Jasper's medium was moods rather than the future, and it was impossible to resist feeling the way he wanted you to feel.

I sat up awkwardly, still tangled in my blanket. "Jasper? What do vampires do for bachelor parties? You're not taking him to a strip club, are you?"

"Don't tell her anything!" Emmett growled from below. There was another thud, and Edward laughed quietly.

"Relax," Jasper told me—and I did. "We Cullens have our own version. Just a few mountain lions, a couple of grizzly bears. Pretty much an ordinary night out."

I wondered if I would ever be able to sound so cavalier about the "vegetarian" vampire diet.

"Thanks, Jasper."

He winked and dropped from sight.

It was completely silent outside. Charlie's muffled snores droned through the walls. I lay back against my pillow, sleepy now. I stared at the walls of my little room, bleached pale in the moonlight, from under heavy lids.

My last night in my room. My last night as Isabella Swan. Tomorrow night, I would be Bella Cullen. Though the whole marriage ordeal was a thorn in my side, I had to admit that I liked the sound of that.

I let my mind wander idly for a moment, expecting sleep to take me. But, after a few minutes, I found myself more alert, anxiety creeping back into my stomach, twisting it into uncomfortable positions. The bed seemed too soft, too warm without Edward in it. Jasper was far away, and all the peaceful, relaxed feelings were gone with him. It was going to be a very long day tomorrow.

I was aware that most of my fears were stupid—I just had to get over myself. Attention was an inevitable part of life. I couldn't always blend in with the scenery. However, I did have a few specific worries that were completely valid.

First there was the wedding dress's train. Alice clearly had let her artistic sense overpower practicalities on that one. Maneuvering the Cullens' staircase in heels

and a train sounded impossible. I should have practiced.

Then there was the guest list.

Tanya's family, the Denali clan, would be arriving sometime before the ceremony. It would be touchy to have Tanya's family in the same room with our guests from the Quileute reservation, Jacob's father and the Clearwaters. The Denalis were no fans of the werewolves. In fact, Tanya's sister Irina was not coming to the wedding at all. She still nursed a vendetta against the werewolves for killing her friend Laurent (just as he was about to kill me). Thanks to that grudge, the Denalis had abandoned Edward's family in their worst hour of need. It had been the unlikely alliance with the Quileute wolves that had saved all our lives when the horde of newborn vampires had attacked. .

. .

Edward had promised me it wouldn't be dangerous to have the Denalis near the Quileutes. Tanya and all her family—besides Irina—felt horribly guilty for that defection. A truce with the werewolves was a small price to make up some of that debt, a price they were prepared to pay.

That was the big problem, but there was a small problem, too: my fragile self-esteem. I'd never seen Tanya before, but I was sure that meeting her wouldn't be a pleasant experience for my ego. Once upon a time, before I was born probably, she'd made her play for Edward—not that I blamed her or anyone else for wanting him. Still, she would be beautiful at

the very least and magnificent at best. Though Edward clearly—if inconceivably—preferred me, I wouldn't be able to help making comparisons. I had grumbled a little until Edward, who knew my weaknesses, made me feel guilty.

"We're the closest thing they have to family, Bella," he'd reminded me. "They still feel like orphans, you know, even after all this time."

So I'd conceded, hiding my frown.

Tanya had a big family now, almost as big as the Cullens. There were five of them; Tanya, Kate, and Irina had been joined by Carmen and Eleazar much the same way the Cullens had been joined by Alice and Jasper, all of them bonded by their desire to live more compassionately than normal vampires did.

For all the company, though, Tanya and her sisters were still alone in one way. Still in mourning. Because a very long time ago, they'd had a mother, too. I could imagine the hole that loss would leave, even after a thousand years; I tried to visualize the Cullen family without their creator, their center, and their guide—their father, Carlisle. I couldn't see it.

Carlisle had explained Tanya's history during one of the many nights I'd stayed late at the Cullens' home, learning as much as I could, preparing as much as was possible for the future I'd chosen. Tanya's mother's story was one among many, a cautionary tale illustrating just one of the rules I would need to be aware of when I joined the immortal world. Only one rule, actually—one law that broke down into a thousand different facets: Keep the secret.

Keeping the secret meant a lot of things—living inconspicuously like the Cullens, moving on before humans could suspect they weren't aging. Or keeping clear of humans altogether—except at mealtime—the way nomads like James and Victoria had lived; the way Jasper's friends, Peter and Charlotte, still lived. It meant keeping control of whatever new vampires you created, like Jasper had done when he'd lived with Maria. Like Victoria had failed to do with her newborns.

And it meant not creating some things in the first place, because some creations were uncontrollable.

"I don't know Tanya's mother's name," Carlisle had admitted, his golden eyes, almost the exact shade of his fair hair, sad with remembering Tanya's pain. "They never speak of her if they can avoid it, never think of her willingly.

"The woman who created Tanya, Kate, and Irina—who loved them, I believe—lived many years before I was born, during a time of plague in our world, the plague of the immortal children.

"What they were thinking, those ancient ones, I can't begin to understand. They created vampires out of humans who were barely more than infants."

I'd had to swallow back the bile that rose in my throat as I'd pictured what he was describing.

"They were very beautiful," Carlisle had explained quickly, seeing my reaction. "So endearing, so enchanting, you can't imagine. You had but to be near them to love them; it was an automatic thing.

"However, they could not be taught. They were frozen at whatever level of development they'd achieved before being bitten. Adorable two-year-olds with dimples and lisps that could destroy half a village in one of their tantrums. If they hungered, they fed, and no words of warning could restrain them. Humans saw them, stories circulated, fear spread like fire in dry brush. . . .

"Tanya's mother created such a child. As with the other ancients, I cannot fathom her reasons." He'd taken a deep, steadying breath. "The Volturi became involved, of course."

I'd flinched as I always did at that name, but of course the legion of Italian vampires—

royalty in their own estimation—was central to this story. There couldn't be a law if there was no punishment; there couldn't be a punishment if there was no one to deliver it. The ancients Aro, Caius, and Marcus ruled the Volturi forces; I'd only met them once, but in that brief encounter, it seemed to me that Aro, with his powerful mind-reading gift—one touch, and he knew every thought a mind had ever held—was the true leader.

"The Volturi studied the immortal children, at home in Volterra and all around the world. Caius decided the young ones were incapable of protecting our secret. And so they had to be destroyed.

"I told you they were loveable. Well, covens fought to the last man—were utterly decimated—to protect them. The carnage was not as widespread as the southern wars on this continent, but more

devastating in its own way. Long-established covens, old traditions, friends… Much was lost. In the end, the practice was completely eliminated. The immortal children became unmentionable, a taboo.

"When I lived with the Volturi, I met two immortal children, so I know firsthand the appeal they had. Aro studied the little ones for many years after the catastrophe they'd caused was over. You know his inquisitive disposition; he was hopeful that they could be tamed. But in the end, the decision was unanimous: the immortal children could not be allowed to exist."

I'd all but forgotten the Denali sisters' mother when the story returned to her.

"It is unclear precisely what happened with Tanya's mother," Carlisle had said. "Tanya, Kate, and Irina were entirely oblivious until the day the Volturi came for them, their mother and her illegal creation already their prisoners. It was ignorance that saved Tanya's and her sisters' lives. Aro touched them and saw their total innocence, so they were not punished with their mother.

"None of them had ever seen the boy before, or dreamed of his existence, until the day they watched him burn in their mother's arms. I can only guess that their mother had kept her secret to protect them from this exact outcome. But why had she created him in the first place? Who was he, and what had he meant to her that would cause her to cross this most uncrossable of lines? Tanya and the others never received an answer to any of these questions. But

they could not doubt their mother's guilt, and I don't think they've ever truly forgiven her.

"Even with Aro's perfect assurance that Tanya, Kate, and Irina were innocent, Caius wanted them to burn. Guilty by association. They were lucky that Aro felt like being merciful that day. Tanya and her sisters were pardoned, but left with unhealing hearts and a very healthy respect for the law. . . ."

I'm not sure where exactly the memory turned into a dream. One moment it seemed that I was listening to Carlisle in my memory, looking at his face, and then a moment later I was looking at a gray, barren field and smelling the thick scent of burning incense in the air. I was not alone there.

The huddle of figures in the center of the field, all shrouded in ashy cloaks, should have terrified me—they could only be Volturi, and I was, against what they'd decreed at our last meeting, still human. But I knew, as I sometimes did in dreams, that I was invisible to them.

Scattered all around me were smoking heaps. I recognized the sweetness in the air and did not examine the mounds too closely. I had no desire to see the faces of the vampires they had executed, half afraid that I might recognize someone in the smoldering pyres. The Volturi soldiers stood in a circle around something or someone, and I heard their whispery voices raised in agitation. I edged closer to the cloaks, compelled by the dream to see whatever thing or person they were examining with such intensity. Creeping carefully between two of the

tall hissing shrouds, I finally saw the object of their debate, raised up on a little hillock above them.

He was beautiful, adorable, just as Carlisle had described. The boy was a toddler still, maybe two years of age. Light brown curls framed his cherubic face with its round cheeks and full lips. And he was trembling, his eyes closed as if he was too frightened to watch death coming closer every second.

I was struck with such a powerful need to save the lovely, terrified child that the Volturi, despite all their devastating menace, no longer mattered to me. I shoved past them, not caring if they realized my presence. Breaking free of them altogether, I sprinted toward the boy.

Only to stagger to a halt as I got a clear view of the hillock that he sat upon. It was not earth and rock, but a pile of human bodies, drained and lifeless. Too late not to see these faces. I knew them all—Angela, Ben, Jessica, Mike.… And directly beneath the adorable boy were the bodies of my father and my mother.

The child opened his bright, bloodred eyes.

# Chapter 3

## BIG DAY

My own eyes flew open.

I lay shivering and gasping in my warm bed for several minutes, trying to break free of the dream. The sky outside my window turned gray and then pale pink while I waited for my heart to slow.

When I was fully back to the reality of my messy, familiar room, I was a little annoyed with myself. What a dream to have the night before my wedding! That's what I got for obsessing over disturbing stories in the middle of the night.

Eager to shake off the nightmare, I got dressed and headed down to the kitchen long before I needed to. First I cleaned the already tidy rooms, and then when Charlie was up I made him pancakes. I was much too keyed up to have any interest in eating breakfast myself—I sat bouncing in my seat while he ate.

"You're picking up Mr. Weber at three o'clock," I reminded him.

"I don't have that much to do today besides bring the minister, Bells. I'm not likely to forget my only job." Charlie had taken the entire day off for the wedding, and he was definitely at loose ends. Now and then, his eyes flickered furtively to the closet under the stairs, where he kept his fishing gear.

"That's not your only job. You also have to be dressed and presentable."

He scowled into his cereal bowl and muttered the words “monkey suit” under his breath.

There was a brisk tapping on the front door.

“You think you have it bad,” I said, grimacing as I rose. “Alice will be working on me all day long.”

Charlie nodded thoughtfully, conceding that he did have the lesser ordeal. I ducked in to kiss the top of his head as I passed—he blushed and harrumph ed—and then continued on to get the door for my best girlfriend and soon-to-be sister. Alice’s short black hair was not in its usual spiky do—it was smoothed into sleek pin curls around her pixie face, which wore a contrastingly businesslike expression. She dragged me from the house with barely a “Hey, Charlie” called over her shoulder. Alice appraised me as I got into her Porsche.

“Oh, hell, look at your eyes!” She tsk ed in reproach. “What did you do? Stay up all night?”

“Almost.”

She glowered. “I’ve only allotted so much time to make you stunning, Bella—you might have taken better care of my raw material.”

“No one expects me to be stunning. I think the bigger problem is that I might fall asleep during the ceremony and not be able to say ‘I do’ at the right part, and then Edward will make his escape.”

She laughed. “I’ll throw my bouquet at you when it gets close.”

“Thanks.”

“At least you’ll have plenty of time to sleep on the plane tomorrow.”

I raised one eyebrow. Tomorrow, I mused. If we were heading out tonight after the reception, and we would still be on a plane tomorrow… well, we weren’t going to Boise, Idaho. Edward hadn’t dropped a single hint. I wasn’t too stressed about the mystery, but it was strange not knowing where I would be sleeping tomorrow night. Or hopefully not sleeping . . .

Alice realized that she’d given something away, and she frowned.

“You’re all packed and ready,” she said to distract me.

It worked. “Alice, I wish you would let me pack my own things!”

“It would have given too much away.”

“And denied you an opportunity to shop.”

“You’ll be my sister officially in ten short hours… it’s about time to get over this aversion to new clothes.”

I glowered groggily out the windshield until we were almost to the house.

“Is he back yet?” I asked.

“Don’t worry, he’ll be there before the music starts. But you don’t get to see him, no matter when he gets back. We’re doing this the traditional way.”

I snorted. “Traditional!”

"Okay, aside from the bride and groom."

"You know he's already peeked."

"Oh no—that's why I'm the only one who's seen you in the dress. I've been very careful to not think about it when he's around."

"Well," I said as we turned into the drive, "I see you got to reuse your graduation decorations." Three miles of drive were once again wrapped in hundreds of thousands of twinkle lights. This time, she'd added white satin bows.

"Waste not, want not. Enjoy this, because you don't get to see the inside decorations until it's time." She pulled into the cavernous garage north of the main house; Emmett's big Jeep was still gone.

"Since when is the bride not allowed to see the decorations?" I protested.

"Since she put me in charge. I want you to get the full impact coming down the stairs."

She clapped her hand over my eyes before she let me inside the kitchen. I was immediately assailed by the scent.

"What is that?" I wondered as she guided me into the house.

"Is it too much?" Alice's voice was abruptly worried. "You're the first human in here; I hope I got it right."

"It smells wonderful!" I assured her—almost intoxicating, but not at all overwhelming, the balance

of the different fragrances was subtle and flawless. “Orange blossoms…

lilac… and something else—am I right?”

“Very good, Bella. You only missed the freesia and the roses.”

She didn’t uncover my eyes until we were in her oversized bathroom. I stared at the long counter, covered in all the paraphernalia of a beauty salon, and began to feel my sleepless night.

“Is this really necessary? I’m going to look plain next to him no matter what.”

She pushed me down into a low pink chair. “No one will dare to call you plain when I’m through with you.”

“Only because they’re afraid you’ll suck their blood,” I muttered. I leaned back in the chair and closed my eyes, hoping I’d be able to nap through it. I did drift in and out a little bit while she masked, buffed, and polished every surface of my body. It was after lunchtime when Rosalie glided past the bathroom door in a shimmery silver gown with her golden hair piled up in a soft crown on top of her head. She was so beautiful it made me want to cry. What was even the point of dressing up with Rosalie around?

“They’re back,” Rosalie said, and immediately my childish fit of despair passed. Edward was home.

“Keep him out of here!”

"He won't cross you today," Rosalie reassured her. "He values his life too much. Esme's got them finishing things up out back. Do you want some help? I could do her hair."

My jaw fell open. I floundered around in my head, trying to remember how to close it. I had never been Rosalie's favorite person in the world. Then, making things even more strained between us, she was personally offended by the choice I was making now. Though she had her impossible beauty, her loving family, and her soul mate in Emmett, she would have traded it all to be human. And here I was, callously throwing away everything she wanted in life like it was garbage. It didn't exactly warm her to me.

"Sure," Alice said easily. "You can start braiding. I want it intricate. The veil goes here, underneath." Her hands started combing through my hair, hefting it, twisting it, illustrating in detail what she wanted. When she was done, Rosalie's hands replaced hers, shaping my hair with a feather-light touch. Alice moved back to my face. Once Rosalie received Alice's commendation on my hair, she was sent off to retrieve my dress and then to locate Jasper, who had been dispatched to pick up my mother and her husband, Phil, from their hotel. Downstairs, I could faintly hear the door opening and closing over and over. Voices began to float up to us.

Alice made me stand so that she could ease the dress over my hair and makeup. My knees shook so badly as she fastened the long line of pearl buttons up my back that the satin quivered in little wavelets down to the floor.

"Deep breaths, Bella," Alice said. "And try to lower your heart rate. You're going to sweat off your new face."

I gave her the best sarcastic expression I could manage. "I'll get right on that."

"I have to get dressed now. Can you hold yourself together for two minutes?"

"Um… maybe?"

She rolled her eyes and darted out the door.

I concentrated on my breathing, counting each movement of my lungs, and stared at the patterns that the bathroom light made on the shiny fabric of my skirt. I was afraid to look in the mirror—afraid the image of myself in the wedding dress would send me over the edge into a full-scale panic attack.

Alice was back before I had taken two hundred breaths, in a dress that flowed down her slender body like a silvery waterfall.

"Alice—wow."

"It's nothing. No one will be looking at me today. Not while you're in the room."

"Har har."

"Now, are you in control of yourself, or do I have to bring Jasper up here?"

"They're back? Is my mom here?"

"She just walked in the door. She's on her way up."

Renée had flown in two days ago, and I'd spent every minute I could with her—every minute that I could pry her away from Esme and the decorations, in other words. As far as I could tell, she was having more fun with this than a kid locked inside Disneyland overnight. In a way, I felt almost as cheated as Charlie. All that wasted terror over her reaction . . .

"Oh, Bella!" she squealed now, gushing before she was all the way through the door.

"Oh, honey, you're so beautiful! Oh, I'm going to cry! Alice, you're amazing! You and Esme should go into business as wedding planners. Where did you find this dress? It's gorgeous! So graceful, so elegant. Bella, you look like you just stepped out of an Austen movie." My mother's voice sounded a little distance away, and everything in the room was slightly blurry. "Such a creative idea, designing the theme around Bella's ring. So romantic! To think it's been in Edward's family since the eighteen hundreds!"

Alice and I exchanged a brief conspiratorial look. My mom was off on the dress style by more than a hundred years. The wedding wasn't actually centered around the ring, but around Edward himself.

There was a loud, gruff throat-clearing in the doorway.

"Renée, Esme said it's time you got settled down there," Charlie said.

"Well, Charlie, don't you look dashing!" Renée said in a tone that was almost shocked. That might have explained the crustiness of Charlie's answer.

“Alice got to me.”

“Is it really time already?” Renée said to herself, sounding almost as nervous as I felt.

“This has all gone so fast. I feel dizzy.”

That made two of us.

“Give me a hug before I go down,” Renée insisted. “Carefully now, don’t tear anything.”

My mother squeezed me gently around the waist, then wheeled for the door, only to complete the spin and face me again.

“Oh goodness, I almost forgot! Charlie, where’s the box?”

My dad rummaged in his pockets for a minute and then produced a small white box, which he handed to Renée. Renée lifted the lid and held it out to me.

“Something blue,” she said.

“Something old, too. They were your Grandma Swan’s,” Charlie added. “We had a jeweler replace the paste stones with sapphires.”

Inside the box were two heavy silver hair combs. Dark blue sapphires were clustered into intricate floral shapes atop the teeth.

My throat got all thick. “Mom, Dad… you shouldn’t have.”

"Alice wouldn't let us do anything else," Renée said. "Every time we tried, she all but ripped our throats out."

A hysterical giggle burst through my lips.

Alice stepped up and quickly slid both combs into my hair under the edge of the thick braids. "That's something old and something blue," Alice mused, taking a few steps back to admire me. "And your dress is new… so here—"

She flicked something at me. I held my hands out automatically, and the filmy white garter landed in my palms.

"That's mine and I want it back," Alice told me.

I blushed.

"There," Alice said with satisfaction. "A little color—that's all you needed. You are officially perfect." With a little self-congratulatory smile, she turned to my parents.

"Renée, you need to get downstairs."

"Yes, ma'am." Renée blew me a kiss and hurried out the door.

"Charlie, would you grab the flowers, please?"

While Charlie was out of the room, Alice hooked the garter out of my hands and then ducked under my skirt. I gasped and tottered as her cold hand caught my ankle; she yanked the garter into place.

She was back on her feet before Charlie returned with the two frothy white bouquets. The scent of roses and orange blossom and freesia enveloped me in a soft mist. Rosalie—the best musician in the family next to Edward—began playing the piano downstairs. Pachelbel's Canon. I began hyperventilating.

"Easy, Bells," Charlie said. He turned to Alice nervously. "She looks a little sick. Do you think she's going to make it?"

His voice sounded far away. I couldn't feel my legs.

"She'd better."

Alice stood right in front of me, on her tiptoes to better stare me in the eye, and gripped my wrists in her hard hands.

"Focus, Bella. Edward is waiting for you down there."

I took a deep breath, willing myself into composure.

The music slowly morphed into a new song. Charlie nudged me. "Bells, we're up to bat."

"Bella?" Alice asked, still holding my gaze.

"Yes," I squeaked. "Edward. Okay." I let her pull me from the room, with Charlie tagging along at my elbow.

The music was louder in the hall. It floated up the stairs along with the fragrance of a million flowers. I concentrated on the idea of Edward waiting below to get my feet to shuffle forward.

The music was familiar, Wagner's traditional march surrounded by a flood of embellishments.

"It's my turn," Alice chimed. "Count to five and follow me." She began a slow, graceful dance down the staircase. I should have realized that having Alice as my only bridesmaid was a mistake. I would look that much more uncoordinated coming behind her.

A sudden fanfare trilled through the soaring music. I recognized my cue.

"Don't let me fall, Dad," I whispered. Charlie pulled my hand through his arm and then grasped it tightly.

One step at a time, I told myself as we began to descend to the slow tempo of the march. I didn't lift my eyes until my feet were safely on the flat ground, though I could hear the murmurs and rustling of the audience as I came into view. Blood flooded my cheeks at the sound; of course I could be counted on to be the blushing bride. As soon as my feet were past the treacherous stairs, I was looking for him. For a brief second, I was distracted by the profusion of white blossoms that hung in garlands from everything in the room that wasn't alive, dripping with long lines of white gossamer ribbons. But I tore my eyes from the bowery canopy and searched across the rows of satin-draped chairs—blushing more deeply as I took in the crowd of faces all focused on me—until I found him at last, standing before an arch overflowing with more flowers, more gossamer.

I was barely conscious that Carlisle stood by his side, and Angela's father behind them both. I didn't see my mother where she must have been sitting in the front

row, or my new family, or any of the guests—they would have to wait till later. All I really saw was Edward's face; it filled my vision and overwhelmed my mind. His eyes were a buttery, burning gold; his perfect face was almost severe with the depth of his emotion. And then, as he met my awed gaze, he broke into a breathtaking smile of exultation.

Suddenly, it was only the pressure of Charlie's hand on mine that kept me from sprinting headlong down the aisle.

The march was too slow as I struggled to pace my steps to its rhythm. Mercifully, the aisle was very short. And then, at last, at last, I was there. Edward held out his hand. Charlie took my hand and, in a symbol as old as the world, placed it in Edward's. I touched the cool miracle of his skin, and I was home.

Our vows were the simple, traditional words that had been spoken a million times, though never by a couple quite like us. We'd asked Mr. Weber to make only one small change. He obligingly traded the line "till death do us part" for the more appropriate "as long as we both shall live."

In that moment, as the minister said his part, my world, which had been upside down for so long now, seemed to settle into its proper position. I saw just how silly I'd been for fearing this—as if it were an unwanted birthday gift or an embarrassing exhibition, like the prom. I looked into Edward's shining, triumphant eyes and knew that I was winning, too. Because nothing else mattered but that I could stay

with him. I didn't realize I was crying until it was time to say the binding words.

"I do," I managed to choke out in a nearly unintelligible whisper, blinking my eyes clear so I could see his face.

When it was his turn to speak, the words rang clear and victorious.

"I do," he vowed.

Mr. Weber declared us husband and wife, and then Edward's hands reached up to cradle my face, carefully, as if it were as delicate as the white petals swaying above our heads. I tried to comprehend, through the film of tears blinding me, the surreal fact that this amazing person was mine. His golden eyes looked as if they would have tears, too, if such a thing were not impossible. He bent his head toward mine, and I stretched up on the tips of my toes, throwing my arms—bouquet and all—around his neck. He kissed me tenderly, adoringly; I forgot the crowd, the place, the time, the reason…

only remembering that he loved me, that he wanted me, that I was his. He began the kiss, and he had to end it; I clung to him, ignoring the titters and the throat-clearing in the audience. Finally, his hands restrained my face and he pulled back

—too soon—to look at me. On the surface his sudden smile was amused, almost a smirk. But underneath his momentary entertainment at my public exhibition was a deep joy that echoed my own.

The crowd erupted into applause, and he turned our bodies to face our friends and family. I couldn't look away from his face to see them.

My mother's arms were the first to find me, her tear-streaked face the first thing I saw when I finally tore my eyes unwillingly from Edward. And then I was handed through the crowd, passed from embrace to embrace, only vaguely aware of who held me, my attention centered on Edward's hand clutched tightly in my own. I did recognize the difference between the soft, warm hugs of my human friends and the gentle, cool embraces of my new family.

One scorching hug stood out from all the others—Seth Clearwater had braved the throng of vampires to stand in for my lost werewolf friend.

# Chapter 4

## GESTURE

The wedding flowed into the reception party smoothly—proof of Alice's flawless planning. It was just twilight over the river; the ceremony had lasted exactly the right amount of time, allowing the sun to set behind the trees. The lights in the trees glimmered as Edward led me through the glass back doors, making the white flowers glow. There were another ten thousand flowers out here, serving as a fragrant, airy tent over the dance floor set up on the grass under two of the ancient cedars. Things slowed down, relaxed as the mellow August evening surrounded us. The little crowd spread out under the soft shine of the twinkle lights, and we were greeted again by the friends we'd just embraced. There was time to talk now, to laugh.

"Congrats, guys," Seth Clearwater told us, ducking his head under the edge of a flower garland. His mother, Sue, was tight by his side, eyeing the guests with wary intensity. Her face was thin and fierce, an expression that was accented by her short, severe hairstyle; it was as short as her daughter Leah's—I wondered if she'd cut it the same way in a show of solidarity. Billy Black, on Seth's other side, was not as tense as Sue. When I looked at Jacob's father, I always felt like I was seeing two people rather than just one. There was the old man in the wheelchair with the lined face and the white smile that everyone else saw. And then there was the direct descendant of a long line of powerful, magical chieftains, cloaked in

the authority he'd been born with. Though the magic had—in the absence of a catalyst—skipped his generation, Billy was still a part of the power and the legend. It flowed straight through him. It flowed to his son, the heir to the magic, who had turned his back on it. That left Sam Uley to act as the chief of legends and magic now. . . .

Billy seemed oddly at ease considering the company and the event—his black eyes sparkled like he'd just gotten some good news. I was impressed by his composure. This wedding must have seemed a very bad thing, the worst thing that could happen to his best friend's daughter, in Billy's eyes.

I knew it wasn't easy for him to restrain his feelings, considering the challenge this event foreshadowed to the ancient treaty between the Cullens and the Quileutes—the treaty that prohibited the Cullens from ever creating another vampire. The wolves knew a breach was coming, but the Cullens had no idea how they would react. Before the alliance, it would have meant an immediate attack. A war. But now that they knew each other better, would there be forgiveness instead?

As if in response to that thought, Seth leaned toward Edward, arms extended. Edward returned the hug with his free arm.

I saw Sue shudder delicately.

"It's good to see things work out for you, man," Seth said. "I'm happy for you."

"Thank you, Seth. That means a lot to me." Edward pulled away from Seth and looked at Sue and Billy. "Thank you, as well. For letting Seth come. For supporting Bella today."

"You're welcome," Billy said in his deep, gravelly voice, and I was surprised at the optimism in his tone. Perhaps a stronger truce was on the horizon. A bit of a line was forming, so Seth waved goodbye and wheeled Billy toward the food. Sue kept one hand on each of them.

Angela and Ben were the next to claim us, followed by Angela's parents and then Mike and Jessica—who were, to my surprise, holding hands. I hadn't heard that they were together again. That was nice.

Behind my human friends were my new cousins-in-law, the Denali vampire clan. I realized I was holding my breath as the vampire in front—Tanya, I assumed from the strawberry tint in her blond curls—reached out to embrace Edward. Next to her, three other vampires with golden eyes stared at me with open curiosity. One woman had long, pale blond hair, straight as corn silk. The other woman and the man beside her were both black-haired, with a hint of an olive tone to their chalky complexions. And they were all four so beautiful that it made my stomach hurt. Tanya was still holding Edward.

"Ah, Edward," she said. "I've missed you."

Edward chuckled and deftly maneuvered out of the hug, placing his hand lightly on her shoulder and stepping back, as if to get a better look at her. "It's been too long, Tanya. You look well."

"So do you."

"Let me introduce you to my wife." It was the first time Edward had said that word since it was officially true; he seemed like he would explode with satisfaction saying it now. The Denalis all laughed lightly in response. "Tanya, this is my Bella."

Tanya was every bit as lovely as my worst nightmares had predicted. She eyed me with a look that was much more speculative than it was resigned, and then reached out to take my hand.

"Welcome to the family, Bella." She smiled, a little rueful. "We consider ourselves Carlisle's extended family, and I am sorry about the, er, recent incident when we did not behave as such. We should have met you sooner. Can you forgive us?"

"Of course," I said breathlessly. "It's so nice to meet you."

"The Cullens are all evened up in numbers now. Perhaps it will be our turn next, eh, Kate?" She grinned at the blonde.

"Keep the dream alive," Kate said with a roll of her golden eyes. She took my hand from Tanya's and squeezed it gently. "Welcome, Bella."

The dark-haired woman put her hand on top of Kate's. "I'm Carmen, this is Eleazar. We're all so very pleased to finally meet you."

"M-me, too," I stuttered.

Tanya glanced at the people waiting behind her—Charlie's deputy, Mark, and his wife. Their eyes were huge as they took in the Denali clan.

"We'll get to know each other later. We'll have eons of time for that!" Tanya laughed as she and her family moved on.

All the standard traditions were kept. I was blinded by flashbulbs as we held the knife over a spectacular cake—too grand, I thought, for our relatively intimate group of friends and family. We took turns shoving cake in each other's faces; Edward manfully swallowed his portion as I watched in disbelief. I threw my bouquet with atypical skill, right into Angela's surprised hands. Emmett and Jasper howled with laughter at my blush while Edward removed my borrowed garter—which I'd shimmied down nearly to my ankle— very carefully with his teeth. With a quick wink at me, he shot it straight into Mike Newton's face.

And when the music started, Edward pulled me into his arms for the customary first dance; I went willingly, despite my fear of dancing—especially dancing in front of an audience—just happy to have him holding me. He did all the work, and I twirled effortlessly under the glow of a canopy of lights and the bright flashes from the cameras.

"Enjoying the party, Mrs. Cullen?" he whispered in my ear.

I laughed. "That will take a while to get used to."

“We have a while,” he reminded me, his voice exultant, and he leaned down to kiss me while we danced. Cameras clicked feverishly.

The music changed, and Charlie tapped on Edward’s shoulder.

It wasn’t nearly as easy to dance with Charlie. He was no better at it than I was, so we moved safely from side to side in a tiny square formation. Edward and Esme spun around us like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.

“I’m going to miss you at home, Bella. I’m already lonely.”

I spoke through a tight throat, trying to make a joke of it. “I feel just horrible, leaving you to cook for yourself—it’s practically criminal negligence. You could arrest me.”

He grinned. “I suppose I’ll survive the food. Just call me whenever you can.”

“I promise.”

It seemed like I danced with everyone. It was good to see all my old friends, but I really wanted to be with Edward more than anything else. I was happy when he finally cut in, just half a minute after a new dance started.

“Still not that fond of Mike, eh?” I commented as Edward whirled me away from him.

“Not when I have to listen to his thoughts. He’s lucky I didn’t kick him out. Or worse.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Have you had a chance to look at yourself?”

“Um. No, I guess not. Why?”

“Then I suppose you don’t realize how utterly, heart-breakingly beautiful you are tonight. I’m not surprised Mike’s having difficulty with improper thoughts about a married woman. I am disappointed that Alice didn’t make sure you were forced to look in a mirror.”

“You are very biased, you know.”

He sighed and then paused and turned me around to face the house. The wall of glass reflected the party back like a long mirror. Edward pointed to the couple in the mirror directly across from us.

“Biased, am I?”

I caught just a glimpse of Edward’s reflection—a perfect duplicate of his perfect face—

with a dark-haired beauty at his side. Her skin was cream and roses, her eyes were huge with excitement and framed with thick lashes. The narrow sheath of the shimmering white dress flared out subtly at the train almost like an inverted calla lily, cut so skillfully that her body looked elegant and graceful—while it was motionless, at least. Before I could blink and make the beauty turn back into me, Edward suddenly stiffened and turned automatically in the other direction, as if someone had called his name.

“Oh!” he said. His brow furrowed for an instant and then smoothed out just as quickly. Suddenly, he was smiling a brilliant smile.

“What is it?” I asked.

“A surprise wedding gift.”

“Huh?”

He didn’t answer; he just started dancing again, spinning me the opposite way we’d been headed before, away from the lights and then into the deep swath of night that ringed the luminous dance floor.

He didn’t pause until we reached the dark side of one of the huge cedars. Then Edward looked straight into the blackest shadow.

“Thank you,” Edward said to the darkness. “This is very… kind of you.”

“Kind is my middle name,” a husky familiar voice answered from the black night. “Can I cut in?”

My hand flew up to my throat, and if Edward hadn’t been holding me I would have collapsed.

“Jacob!” I choked as soon as I could breathe. “Jacob!”

“Hey there, Bells.”

I stumbled toward the sound of his voice. Edward kept his grip under my elbow until another set of strong hands caught me in the darkness. The heat from Jacob’s skin burned right through the thin satin dress as he pulled me close. He made no effort to dance; he just hugged me while I buried my face in

his chest. He leaned down to press his cheek to the top of my head.

“Rosalie won’t forgive me if she doesn’t get her official turn on the dance floor,”

Edward murmured, and I knew he was leaving us, giving me a gift of his own—this moment with Jacob.

“Oh, Jacob.” I was crying now; I couldn’t get the words out clearly. “Thank you.”

“Stop blubbering, Bella. You’ll ruin your dress. It’s just me.”

“Just? Oh, Jake! Everything is perfect now.”

He snorted. “Yeah—the party can start. The best man finally made it.”

“Now everyone I love is here.”

I felt his lips brush my hair. “Sorry I’m late, honey.”

“I’m just so happy you came!”

“That was the idea.”

I glanced toward the guests, but I couldn’t see through the dancers to the spot where I’d last seen Jacob’s father. I didn’t know if he’d stayed. “Does Billy know you’re here?”

As soon as I asked, I knew that he must have—it was the only way to explain his uplifted expression before.

“I’m sure Sam’s told him. I’ll go see him when… when the party’s over.”

"He'll be so glad you're home."

Jacob pulled back a little bit and straightened up. He left one hand on the small of my back and grabbed my right hand with the other. He cradled our hands to his chest; I could feel his heart beat under my palm, and I guessed that he hadn't placed my hand there accidentally.

"I don't know if I get more than just this one dance," he said, and he began pulling me around in a slow circle that didn't match the tempo of the music coming from behind us.

"I'd better make the best of it."

We moved to the rhythm of his heart under my hand.

"I'm glad I came," Jacob said quietly after a moment. "I didn't think I would be. But it's good to see you… one more time. Not as sad as I'd thought it would be."

"I don't want you to feel sad."

"I know that. And I didn't come tonight to make you feel guilty."

"No—it makes me very happy that you came. It's the best gift you could have given me."

He laughed. "That's good, because I didn't have time to stop for a real present."

My eyes were adjusting, and I could see his face now, higher up than I expected. Was it possible that he was still growing? He had to be closer to seven feet than to six. It was a relief to see his familiar features

again after all this time—his deep-set eyes shadowed under his shaggy black brows, his high cheekbones, his full lips stretched over his bright teeth in the sarcastic smile that matched his tone. His eyes were tight around the edges—careful; I could see that he was being very careful tonight. He was doing all he could to make me happy, to not slip and show how much this cost him. I'd never done anything good enough to deserve a friend like Jacob.

"When did you decide to come back?"

"Consciously or subconsciously?" He took a deep breath before he answered his own question. "I don't really know. I guess I've been wandering back this direction for a while, and maybe it's because I was headed here. But it wasn't until this morning that I really started running. I didn't know if I could make it." He laughed. "You wouldn't believe how weird this feels—walking around on two legs again. And clothes! And then it's more bizarre because it feels weird. I didn't expect that. I'm out of practice with the whole human thing."

We revolved steadily.

"It would have been a shame to miss seeing you like this, though. That's worth the trip right there. You look unbelievable, Bella. So beautiful."

"Alice invested a lot of time in me today. The dark helps, too."

"It's not so dark for me, you know."

"Right." Werewolf senses. It was easy to forget all the things he could do, he seemed so human. Especially right now.

"You cut your hair," I noted.

"Yeah. Easier, you know. Thought I'd better take advantage of the hands."

"It looks good," I lied.

He snorted. "Right. I did it myself, with rusty kitchen shears." He grinned widely for a moment, and then his smile faded. His expression turned serious. "Are you happy, Bella?"

"Yes."

"Okay." I felt his shoulders shrug. "That's the main thing, I guess."

"How are you, Jacob? Really?"

"I'm fine, Bella, really. You don't need to worry about me anymore. You can stop bugging Seth."

"I'm not just bugging him because of you. I like Seth."

"He's a good kid. Better company than some. I tell you, if I could get rid of the voices in my head, being a wolf would be about perfect."

I laughed at the way it sounded. "Yeah, I can't get mine to shut up, either."

"In your case, that would mean you're insane. Of course, I already knew that you were insane," he teased.

“Thanks.”

“Insanity is probably easier than sharing a pack mind. Crazy people’s voices don’t send babysitters to watch them.”

“Huh?”

“Sam’s out there. And some of the others. Just in case, you know.”

“In case of what?”

“In case I can’t keep it together, something like that. In case I decide to trash the party.”

He flashed a quick smile at what was probably an appealing thought to him. “But I’m not here to ruin your wedding, Bella. I’m here to . . .” He trailed off.

“To make it perfect.”

“That’s a tall order.”

“Good thing you’re so tall.”

He groaned at my bad joke and then sighed. “I’m just here to be your friend. Your best friend, one last time.”

“Sam should give you more credit.”

“Well, maybe I’m being oversensitive. Maybe they’d be here anyway, to keep an eye on Seth. There are a lot of vampires here. Seth doesn’t take that as seriously as he should.”

“Seth knows that he’s not in any danger. He understands the Cullens better than Sam does.”

“Sure, sure,” Jacob said, making peace before it could turn into a fight. It was strange to have him being the diplomat.

“Sorry about those voices,” I said. “Wish I could make it better.” In so many ways.

“It’s not that bad. I’m just whining a little.”

“You’re… happy?”

“Close enough. But enough about me. You’re the star today.” He chuckled. “I bet you’re just loving that. Center of attention.”

“Yeah. Can’t get enough attention.”

He laughed and then stared over my head. With pursed lips, he studied the shimmering glow of the reception party, the graceful whirl of the dancers, the fluttering petals falling from the garlands; I looked with him. It all seemed very distant from this black, quiet space. Almost like watching the white flurries swirling inside a snow globe.

“I’ll give them this much,” he said. “They know how to throw a party.”

“Alice is an unstoppable force of nature.”

He sighed. “Song’s over. Do you think I get another one? Or is that asking too much?”

I tightened my hand around his. “You can have as many dances as you want.”

He laughed. “That would be interesting. I think I’d better stick with two, though. Don’t want to start talk.”

We turned in another circle.

“You’d think I’d be used to telling you goodbye by now,” he murmured. I tried to swallow the lump in my throat, but I couldn’t force it down. Jacob looked at me and frowned. He wiped his fingers across my cheek, catching the tears there.

“You’re not supposed to be the one crying, Bella.”

“Everyone cries at weddings,” I said thickly.

“This is what you want, right?”

“Right.”

“Then smile.”

I tried. He laughed at my grimace.

“I’m going to try to remember you like this. Pretend that . . .”

“That what? That I died?”

He clenched his teeth. He was struggling with himself—with his decision to make his presence here a gift and not a judgment. I could guess what he wanted to say.

“No,” he finally answered. “But I’ll see you this way in my head. Pink cheeks. Heartbeat. Two left feet. All of that.”

I deliberately stomped on his foot as hard as I could.

He smiled. "That's my girl."

He started to say something else and then snapped his mouth closed. Struggling again, teeth gritted against the words he didn't want to say.

My relationship with Jacob used to be so easy. Natural as breathing. But since Edward had come back into my life, it was a constant strain. Because—in Jacob's eyes—by choosing Edward, I was choosing a fate that was worse than death, or at least equivalent to it.

"What is it, Jake? Just tell me. You can tell me anything."

"I—I… I don't have anything to tell you."

"Oh please. Spit it out."

"It's true. It's not… it's—it's a question. It's something I want you to tell me."

"Ask me."

He struggled for another minute and then exhaled. "I shouldn't. It doesn't matter. I'm just morbidly curious."

Because I knew him so well, I understood.

"It's not tonight, Jacob," I whispered.

Jacob was even more obsessed with my humanity than Edward. He treasured every one of my heartbeats, knowing that they were numbered.

"Oh," he said, trying to smother his relief. "Oh."

A new song started playing, but he didn't notice the change this time.

"When?" he whispered.

"I don't know for sure. A week or two, maybe."

His voice changed, took on a defensive, mocking edge. "What's the holdup?"

"I just didn't want to spend my honeymoon writhing in pain."

"You'd rather spend it how? Playing checkers? Ha ha."

"Very funny."

"Kidding, Bells. But, honestly, I don't see the point. You can't have a real honeymoon with your vampire, so why go through the motions? Call a spade a spade. This isn't the first time you've put this off. That's a good thing, though," he said, suddenly earnest.

"Don't be embarrassed about it."

"I'm not putting anything off," I snapped. "And yes I can have a real honeymoon! I can do anything I want! Butt out!"

He stopped our slow circling abruptly. For a moment, I wondered if he'd finally noticed the music change, and I scrambled in my head for a way to patch up our little tiff before he said goodbye to me. We shouldn't part on this note.

And then his eyes bulged wide with a strange kind of confused horror.

"What?" he gasped. "What did you say?"

"About what... ? Jake? What's wrong?"

"What do you mean? Have a real honeymoon? While you're still human? Are you kidding? That's a sick joke, Bella!"

I glared at him. "I said butt out, Jake. This is so not your business. I shouldn't have...

we shouldn't even be talking about this. It's private—"

His enormous hands gripped the tops of my arms, wrapping all the way around, fingers overlapping.

"Ow, Jake! Let go!"

He shook me.

"Bella! Have you lost your mind? You can't be that stupid! Tell me you're joking!"

He shook me again. His hands, tight as tourniquets, were quivering, sending vibrations deep into my bones.

"Jake—stop!"

The darkness was suddenly very crowded.

"Take your hands off her!" Edward's voice was cold as ice, sharp as razors. Behind Jacob, there was a low snarl from the black night, and then another, overlapping the first.

"Jake, bro, back away," I heard Seth Clearwater urge. "You're losing it."

Jacob seemed frozen as he was, his horrified eyes wide and staring.

“You’ll hurt her,” Seth whispered. “Let her go.”

“Now!” Edward snarled.

Jacob’s hands dropped to his sides, and the sudden gush of blood through my waiting veins was almost painful. Before I could register more than that, cold hands replaced the hot ones, and the air was suddenly whooshing past me.

I blinked, and I was on my feet a half dozen feet away from where I’d been standing. Edward was tensed in front of me. There were two enormous wolves braced between him and Jacob, but they did not seem aggressive to me. More like they were trying to prevent the fight.

And Seth—gangly, fifteen-year-old Seth—had his long arms around Jacob’s shaking body, and he was tugging him away. If Jacob phased with Seth so close…

“C’mon, Jake. Let’s go.”

“I’ll kill you,” Jacob said, his voice so choked with rage that it was low as a whisper. His eyes, focused on Edward, burned with fury. “I’ll kill you myself! I’ll do it now!” He shuddered convulsively.

The biggest wolf, the black one, growled sharply.

“Seth, get out of the way,” Edward hissed.

Seth tugged on Jacob again. Jacob was so bewildered with rage that Seth was able to yank him a few feet farther back. “Don’t do it, Jake. Walk away. C’mon.”

Sam—the bigger wolf, the black one—joined Seth then. He put his massive head against Jacob’s chest and shoved.

The three of them—Seth towing, Jake trembling, Sam pushing—disappeared swiftly into the darkness.

The other wolf stared after them. I wasn’t sure, in the weak light, about the color of his fur—chocolate brown, maybe? Was it Quil, then?

“I’m sorry,” I whispered to the wolf.

“It’s all right now, Bella,” Edward murmured.

The wolf looked at Edward. His gaze was not friendly. Edward gave him one cold nod. The wolf huffed and then turned to follow the others, vanishing as they had.

“All right,” Edward said to himself, and then he looked at me. “Let’s get back.”

“But Jake—”

“Sam has him in hand. He’s gone.”

“Edward, I’m so sorry. I was stupid—”

“You did nothing wrong—”

“I have such a big mouth! Why would I… I shouldn’t have let him get to me like that. What was I thinking?”

"Don't worry." He touched my face. "We need to get back to the reception before someone notices our absence."

I shook my head, trying to reorient myself. Before someone noticed? Had anyone missed that?

Then, as I thought about it, I realized the confrontation that had seemed so catastrophic to me had, in reality, been very quiet and short here in the shadows.

"Give me two seconds," I pleaded.

My insides were chaotic with panic and grief, but that didn't matter—only the outside mattered right now. Putting on a good show was something I knew I had to master.

"My dress?"

"You look fine. Not a hair out of place."

I took two deep breaths. "Okay. Let's go."

He put his arms around me and led me back to the light. When we passed under the twinkle lights, he spun me gently onto the dance floor. We melted in with the other dancers as if our dance had never been interrupted.

I glanced around at the guests, but no one seemed shocked or frightened. Only the very palest faces there showed any signs of stress, and they hid it well. Jasper and Emmett were on the edge of the floor, close together, and I guessed that they had been nearby during the confrontation.

“Are you—”

“I’m fine,” I promised. “I can’t believe I did that. What’s wrong with me?”

“Nothing is wrong with you.”

I’d been so glad to see Jacob here. I knew the sacrifice it had taken him. And then I’d ruined it, turned his gift into a disaster. I should be quarantined. But my idiocy would not ruin anything else tonight. I would put this away, shove it in a drawer and lock it up to deal with later. There would be plenty of time to flagellate myself for this, and nothing I could do now would help.

“It’s over,” I said. “Let’s not think of it again tonight.”

I expected a quick agreement from Edward, but he was silent.

“Edward?”

He closed his eyes and touched his forehead to mine. “Jacob is right,” he whispered.

“What am I thinking?”

“He is not.” I tried to keep my face smooth for the watching crowd of friends. “Jacob is way too prejudiced to see anything clearly.”

He mumbled something low that sounded almost like “should let him kill me for even thinking . . .”

“Stop it,” I said fiercely. I grabbed his face in my hands and waited until he opened his eyes. “You and

me. That's the only thing that matters. The only thing you're allowed to think about now. Do you hear me?"

"Yes," he sighed.

"Forget Jacob came." I could do that. I would do that. "For me. Promise that you'll let this go."

He stared into my eyes for a moment before answering. "I promise."

"Thank you. Edward, I'm not afraid."

"I am," he whispered.

"Don't be." I took deep breath and smiled. "By the way, I love you."

He smiled just a little in return. "That's why we're here."

"You're monopolizing the bride," Emmett said, coming up behind Edward's shoulder.

"Let me dance with my little sister. This could be my last chance to make her blush." He laughed loudly, as unaffected as he usually was by any serious atmosphere. It turned out there were actually lots of people I hadn't danced with yet, and that gave me a chance to truly compose and resolve myself. When Edward claimed me again, I found that the Jacob-drawer was shut nice and tight. As he wrapped his arms around me, I was able to unearth my earlier sense of joy, my certainty that everything in my life was in the right place tonight. I smiled and laid my head against his chest. His arms tightened.

"I could get used to this," I said.

"Don't tell me you've gotten over your dancing issues?"

"Dancing isn't so bad—with you. But I was thinking more of this,"—and I pressed myself to him even tighter—"of never having to let you go."

"Never," he promised, and he leaned down to kiss me.

It was a serious kind of kiss—intense, slow but building….

I'd pretty much forgotten where I was when I heard Alice call, "Bella! It's time!"

I felt a brief flicker of irritation with my new sister for the interruption. Edward ignored her; his lips were hard against mine, more urgent than before. My heart broke into a sprint and my palms were slick against his marble neck.

"Do you want to miss your plane?" Alice demanded, right next to me now. "I'm sure you'll have a lovely honeymoon camped out in the airport waiting for another flight."

Edward turned his face slightly to murmur, "Go away, Alice," and then pressed his lips to mine again.

"Bella, do you want to wear that dress on the airplane?" she demanded. I wasn't really paying much attention. At the moment, I simply didn't care. Alice growled quietly. "I'll tell her where you're taking her, Edward. So help me, I will."

He froze. Then he lifted his face from mine and glared at his favorite sister. "You're awfully small to be so hugely irritating."

"I didn't pick out the perfect going-away dress to have it wasted," she snapped back, taking my hand. "Come with me, Bella."

I tugged against her hold, stretching up on my toes to kiss him one more time. She jerked my arm impatiently, hauling me away from him. There were a few chuckles from the watching guests. I gave up then and let her lead me into the empty house. She looked annoyed.

"Sorry, Alice," I apologized.

"I don't blame you, Bella." She sighed. "You don't seem to be able help yourself."

I giggled at her martyred expression, and she scowled.

"Thank you, Alice. It was the most beautiful wedding anyone ever had," I told her earnestly. "Everything was exactly right. You're the best, smartest, most talented sister in the whole world."

That thawed her out; she smiled a huge smile. "I'm glad you liked it."

Renée and Esme were waiting upstairs. The three of them quickly had me out of my dress and into Alice's deep blue going-away ensemble. I was grateful when someone pulled the pins out of my hair and let it fall loose down my back, wavy from the braids, saving me from a hairpin headache later. My mother's tears streamed without a break the entire time.

"I'll call you when I know where I'm going," I promised as I hugged her goodbye. I knew the honeymoon secret was probably driving her crazy; my mother hated secrets, unless she was in on them.

"I'll tell you as soon as she's safely away," Alice outdid me, smirking at my wounded expression. How unfair, for me to be the last to know.

"You have to visit me and Phil very, very soon. It's your turn to go south—see the sun for once," Renée said.

"It didn't rain today," I reminded her, avoiding her request.

"A miracle."

"Everything's ready," Alice said. "Your suitcases are in the car—Jasper's bringing it around." She pulled me back toward the stairs with Renée following, still halfway embracing me.

"I love you, Mom," I whispered as we descended. "I'm so glad you have Phil. Take care of each other."

"I love you, too, Bella, honey."

"Goodbye, Mom. I love you," I said again, my throat thick.

Edward was waiting at the bottom of the stairs. I took his outstretched hand but leaned away, scanning the little crowd that was waiting to see us off.

"Dad?" I asked, my eyes searching.

"Over here," Edward murmured. He pulled me through the guests; they made a pathway for us. We found Charlie leaning awkwardly against the wall behind everyone else, looking a little like he was hiding. The red rims around his eyes explained why.

"Oh, Dad!"

I hugged him around the waist, tears streaming again—I was crying so much tonight. He patted my back.

"There, now. You don't want to miss your plane."

It was hard to talk about love with Charlie—we were so much alike, always reverting to trivial things to avoid embarrassing emotional displays. But this was no time for being self-conscious.

"I love you forever, Dad," I told him. "Don't forget that."

"You, too, Bells. Always have, always will."

I kissed his cheek at the same time that he kissed mine.

"Call me," he said.

"Soon," I promised, knowing this was all I could promise. Just a phone call. My father and my mother could not be allowed to see me again; I would be too different, and much, much too dangerous.

"Go on, then," he said gruffly. "Don't want to be late."

The guests made another aisle for us. Edward pulled me close to his side as we made our escape.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"I am," I said, and I knew that it was true.

Everyone applauded when Edward kissed me on the doorstep. Then he rushed me to the car as the rice storm began. Most of it went wide, but someone, probably Emmett, threw with uncanny precision, and I caught a lot of the ricochets off Edward's back. The car was decorated with more flowers that trailed in streamers along its length, and long gossamer ribbons that were tied to a dozen shoes—designer shoes that looked brand-new—dangling behind the bumper.

Edward shielded me from the rice while I climbed in, and then he was in and we were speeding away as I waved out the window and called "I love you" to the porch, where my families waved back.

The last image I registered was one of my parents. Phil had both arms wrapped tenderly around Renée. She had one arm tight around his waist but had her free hand reached out to hold Charlie's. So many different kinds of love, harmonious in this one moment. It seemed a very hopeful picture to me.

Edward squeezed my hand.

"I love you," he said.

I leaned my head against his arm. "That's why we're here," I quoted him. He kissed my hair.

As we turned onto the black highway and Edward really hit the accelerator, I heard a noise over the purr of the engine, coming from the forest behind us. If I

could hear it, then he certainly could. But he said nothing as the sound slowly faded in the distance. I said nothing, either.

The piercing, heartbroken howling grew fainter and then disappeared entirely.

# Chapter 5

## ISLE ESME

"Houston?" I asked, raising my eyebrows when we reached the gate in Seattle.

"Just a stop along the way," Edward assured me with a grin.

It felt like I'd barely fallen asleep when he woke me. I was groggy as he pulled me through the terminals, struggling to remember how to open my eyes after every blink. It took me a few minutes to catch up with what was going on when we stopped at the international counter to check in for our next flight.

"Rio de Janeiro?" I asked with slightly more trepidation.

"Another stop," he told me.

The flight to South America was long but comfortable in the wide first-class seat, with Edward's arms cradled around me. I slept myself out and awoke unusually alert as we circled toward the airport with the light of the setting sun slanting through the plane's windows.

We didn't stay in the airport to connect with another flight as I'd expected. Instead we took a taxi through the dark, teeming, living streets of Rio. Unable to understand a word of Edward's Portuguese instructions to the driver, I guessed that we were off to find a hotel before the next leg of our journey. A sharp twinge of something very close to stage fright

twisted in the pit of my stomach as I considered that. The taxi continued through the swarming crowds until they thinned somewhat, and we appeared to be nearing the extreme western edge of the city, heading into the ocean.

We stopped at the docks.

Edward led the way down the long line of white yachts moored in the night-blackened water. The boat he stopped at was smaller than the others, sleeker, obviously built for speed instead of space. Still luxurious, though, and more graceful than the rest. He leaped in lightly, despite the heavy bags he carried. He dropped those on the deck and turned to help me carefully over the edge.

I watched in silence while he prepared the boat for departure, surprised at how skilled and comfortable he seemed, because he'd never mentioned an interest in boating before. But then again, he was good at just about everything.

As we headed due east into the open ocean, I reviewed basic geography in my head. As far as I could remember, there wasn't much east of Brazil… until you got to Africa. But Edward sped forward while the lights of Rio faded and ultimately disappeared behind us. On his face was a familiar exhilarated smile, the one produced by any form of speed. The boat plunged through the waves and I was showered with sea spray. Finally the curiosity I'd suppressed so long got the best of me.

"Are we going much farther?" I asked.

It wasn't like him to forget that I was human, but I wondered if he planned for us to live on this small craft for any length of time.

"About another half hour." His eyes took in my hands, clenched on the seat, and he grinned.

Oh well, I thought to myself. He was a vampire, after all. Maybe we were going to Atlantis.

Twenty minutes later, he called my name over the roar of the engine.

"Bella, look there." He pointed straight ahead.

I saw only blackness at first, and the moon's white trail across the water. But I searched the space where he pointed until I found a low black shape breaking into the sheen of moonlight on the waves. As I squinted into the darkness, the silhouette became more detailed. The shape grew into a squat, irregular triangle, with one side trailing longer than the other before sinking into the waves. We drew closer, and I could see the outline was feathery, swaying to the light breeze.

And then my eyes refocused and the pieces all made sense: a small island rose out of the water ahead of us, waving with palm fronds, a beach glowing pale in the light of the moon.

"Where are we?" I murmured in wonder while he shifted course, heading around to the north end of the island.

He heard me, despite the noise of the engine, and smiled a wide smile that gleamed in the moonlight.

“This is Isle Esme.”

The boat slowed dramatically, drawing with precision into position against a short dock constructed of wooden planks, bleached into whiteness by the moon. The engine cut off, and the silence that followed was profound. There was nothing but the waves, slapping lightly against the boat, and the rustle of the breeze in the palms. The air was warm, moist, and fragrant—like the steam left behind after a hot shower.

“Isle Esme?” My voice was low, but it still sounded too loud as it broke into the quiet night.

“A gift from Carlisle—Esme offered to let us borrow it.”

A gift. Who gives an island as a gift? I frowned. I hadn’t realized that Edward’s extreme generosity was a learned behavior.

He placed the suitcases on the dock and then turned back, smiling his perfect smile as he reached for me. Instead of taking my hand, he pulled me right up into his arms.

“Aren’t you supposed to wait for the threshold?” I asked, breathless, as he sprung lightly out of the boat.

He grinned. “I’m nothing if not thorough.”

Gripping the handles of both huge steamer trunks in one hand and cradling me in the other arm, he carried me up the dock and onto a pale sand pathway through the dark vegetation.

For a short while it was pitch black in the jungle-like growth, and then I could see a warm light ahead. It was about at the point when I realized the light was a house—the two bright, perfect squares were wide windows framing a front door—that the stage fright attacked again, more forcefully than before, worse than when I'd thought we were headed for a hotel.

My heart thudded audibly against my ribs, and my breath seemed to get stuck in my throat. I felt Edward's eyes on my face, but I refused to meet his gaze. I stared straight ahead, seeing nothing.

He didn't ask what I was thinking, which was out of character for him. I guessed that meant that he was just as nervous as I suddenly was.

He set the suitcases on the deep porch to open the doors—they were unlocked. Edward looked down at me, waiting until I met his gaze before he stepped through the threshold.

He carried me through the house, both of us very quiet, flipping on lights as he went. My vague impression of the house was that it was quite large for a tiny island, and oddly familiar. I'd gotten used to the pale-on-pale color scheme preferred by the Cullens; it felt like home. I couldn't focus on any specifics, though. The violent pulse beating behind my ears made everything a little blurry.

Then Edward stopped and turned on the last light.

The room was big and white, and the far wall was mostly glass—standard décor for my vampires. Outside, the moon was bright on white sand and, just

a few yards away from the house, glistening waves. But I barely noted that part. I was more focused on the absolutely huge white bed in the center of the room, hung with billowy clouds of mosquito netting.

Edward set me on my feet.

“I’ll… go get the luggage.”

The room was too warm, stuffier than the tropical night outside. A bead of sweat dewed up on the nape of my neck. I walked slowly forward until I could reach out and touch the foamy netting. For some reason I felt the need to make sure everything was real. I didn’t hear Edward return. Suddenly, his wintry finger caressed the back of my neck, wiping away the drop of perspiration.

“It’s a little hot here,” he said apologetically. “I thought… that would be best.”

“Thorough,” I murmured under my breath, and he chuckled. It was a nervous sound, rare for Edward.

“I tried to think of everything that would make this… easier,” he admitted. I swallowed loudly, still facing away from him. Had there ever been a honeymoon like this before?

I knew the answer to that. No. There had not.

“I was wondering,” Edward said slowly, “if… first… maybe you’d like to take a midnight swim with me?” He took a deep breath, and his voice was more at ease when he spoke again. “The water will be very warm. This is the kind of beach you approve of.”

"Sounds nice." My voice broke.

"I'm sure you'd like a human minute or two…. It was a long journey."

I nodded woodenly. I felt barely human; maybe a few minutes alone would help. His lips brushed against my throat, just below my ear. He chuckled once and his cool breath tickled my overheated skin. "Don't take too long, Mrs. Cullen."

I jumped a little at the sound of my new name.

His lips brushed down my neck to the tip of my shoulder. "I'll wait for you in the water."

He walked past me to the French door that opened right onto the beach sand. On the way, he shrugged out of his shirt, dropping it on the floor, and then slipped through the door into the moonlit night. The sultry, salty air swirled into the room behind him. Did my skin burst into flames? I had to look down to check. Nope, nothing was burning. At least, not visibly.

I reminded myself to breathe, and then I stumbled toward the giant suitcase that Edward had opened on top of a low white dresser. It must be mine, because my familiar bag of toiletries was right on top, and there was a lot of pink in there, but I didn't recognize even one article of clothing. As I pawed through the neatly folded piles—looking for something familiar and comfortable, a pair of old sweats maybe—it came to my attention that there was an awful lot of sheer lace and skimpy satin in my hands. Lingerie. Very lingerie-ish lingerie, with French tags.

I didn't know how or when, but someday, Alice was going to pay for this. Giving up, I went to the bathroom and peeked out through the long windows that opened to the same beach as the French doors. I couldn't see him; I guessed he was there in the water, not bothering to come up for air. In the sky above, the moon was lopsided, almost full, and the sand was bright white under its shine. A small movement caught my eye—draped over a bend in one of the palm trees that fringed the beach, the rest of his clothes were swaying in the light breeze.

A rush of heat flashed across my skin again.

I took a couple of deep breaths and then went to the mirrors above the long stretch of counters. I looked exactly like I'd been sleeping on a plane all day. I found my brush and yanked it harshly through the snarls on the back of my neck until they were smoothed out and the bristles were full of hair. I brushed my teeth meticulously, twice. Then I washed my face and splashed water on the back of my neck, which was feeling feverish. That felt so good that I washed my arms as well, and finally I decided to just give up and take the shower. I knew it was ridiculous to shower before swimming, but I needed to calm down, and hot water was one reliable way to do that. Also, shaving my legs again seemed like a pretty good idea.

When I was done, I grabbed a huge white towel off the counter and wrapped it under my arms.

Then I was faced with a dilemma I hadn't considered. What was I supposed to put on?

Not a swimsuit, obviously. But it seemed silly to put my clothes back on, too. I didn't even want to think about the things Alice had packed for me.

My breathing started to accelerate again and my hands trembled—so much for the calming effects of the shower. I started to feel a little dizzy, apparently a full-scale panic attack on the way. I sat down on the cool tile floor in my big towel and put my head between my knees. I prayed he wouldn't decide to come look for me before I could pull myself together. I could imagine what he would think if he saw me going to pieces this way. It wouldn't be hard for him to convince himself that we were making a mistake. And I wasn't freaking out because I thought we were making a mistake. Not at all. I was freaking out because I had no idea how to do this, and I was afraid to walk out of this room and face the unknown. Especially in French lingerie. I knew I wasn't ready for that yet.

This felt exactly like having to walk out in front of a theater full of thousands with no idea what my lines were.

How did people do this—swallow all their fears and trust someone else so implicitly with every imperfection and fear they had—with less than the absolute commitment Edward had given me? If it weren't Edward out there, if I didn't know in every cell of my body that he loved me as much as I loved him—unconditionally and irrevocably and, to be honest, irrationally—I'd never be able to get up off this floor. But it was Edward out there, so I whispered the words "Don't be a coward" under my breath and

scrambled to my feet. I hitched the towel tighter under my arms and marched determinedly from the bathroom. Past the suitcase full of lace and the big bed without looking at either. Out the open glass door onto the powder-fine sand. Everything was black-and-white, leached colorless by the moon. I walked slowly across the warm powder, pausing beside the curved tree where he had left his clothes. I laid my hand against the rough bark and checked my breathing to make sure it was even. Or even enough.

I looked across the low ripples, black in the darkness, searching for him. He wasn't hard to find. He stood, his back to me, waist deep in the midnight water, staring up at the oval moon. The pallid light of the moon turned his skin a perfect white, like the sand, like the moon itself, and made his wet hair black as the ocean. He was motionless, his hands resting palms down against the water; the low waves broke around him as if he were a stone. I stared at the smooth lines of his back, his shoulders, his arms, his neck, the flawless shape of him....

The fire was no longer a flash burn across my skin—it was slow and deep now; it smoldered away all my awkwardness, my shy uncertainty. I slipped the towel off without hesitation, leaving it on the tree with his clothes, and walked out into the white light; it made me pale as the snowy sand, too.

I couldn't hear the sound of my footsteps as I walked to the water's edge, but I guessed that he could. Edward did not turn. I let the gentle swells break over my toes, and found that he'd been right about the temperature—it was very warm, like bath water. I

stepped in, walking carefully across the invisible ocean floor, but my care was unnecessary; the sand continued perfectly smooth, sloping gently toward Edward. I waded through the weightless current till I was at his side, and then I placed my hand lightly over his cool hand lying on the water.

“Beautiful,” I said, looking up at the moon, too.

“It’s all right,” he answered, unimpressed. He turned slowly to face me; little waves rolled away from his movement and broke against my skin. His eyes looked silver in his ice-colored face. He twisted his hand up so that he could twine our fingers beneath the surface of the water. It was warm enough that his cool skin did not raise goose bumps on mine.

“But I wouldn’t use the word beautiful, ” he continued. “Not with you standing here in comparison.”

I half-smiled, then raised my free hand—it didn’t tremble now—and placed it over his heart. White on white; we matched, for once. He shuddered the tiniest bit at my warm touch. His breath came rougher now.

“I promised we would try,” he whispered, suddenly tense. “If… if I do something wrong, if I hurt you, you must tell me at once.”

I nodded solemnly, keeping my eyes on his. I took another step through the waves and leaned my head against his chest.

“Don’t be afraid,” I murmured. “We belong together.”

I was abruptly overwhelmed by the truth of my own words. This moment was so perfect, so right, there was no way to doubt it.

His arms wrapped around me, holding me against him, summer and winter. It felt like every nerve ending in my body was a live wire.

“Forever,” he agreed, and then pulled us gently into deeper water. The sun, hot on the bare skin of my back, woke me in the morning. Late morning, maybe afternoon, I wasn’t sure. Everything besides the time was clear, though; I knew exactly where I was—the bright room with the big white bed, brilliant sunlight streaming through the open doors. The clouds of netting would soften the shine. I didn’t open my eyes. I was too happy to change anything, no matter how small. The only sounds were the waves outside, our breathing, my heartbeat….

I was comfortable, even with the baking sun. His cool skin was the perfect antidote to the heat. Lying across his wintry chest, his arms wound around me, felt very easy and natural. I wondered idly what I’d been so panicky about last night. My fears all seemed silly now.

His fingers softly trailed down the contours of my spine, and I knew that he knew I was awake. I kept my eyes shut and tightened my arms around his neck, holding myself closer to him.

He didn’t speak; his fingers moved up and down my back, barely touching it as he lightly traced patterns on my skin.

I would have been happy to lie here forever, to never disturb this moment, but my body had other ideas. I laughed at my impatient stomach. It seemed sort of prosaic to be hungry after all that had passed last night. Like being brought back down to earth from some great height.

“What’s funny?” he murmured, still stroking my back. The sound of his voice, serious and husky, brought with it a deluge of memories from the night, and I felt a blush color my face and neck.

To answer his question, my stomach growled. I laughed again. “You just can’t escape being human for very long.”

I waited, but he did not laugh with me. Slowly, sinking through the many layers of bliss that clouded my head, came the realization of a different atmosphere outside my own glowing sphere of happiness.

I opened my eyes; the first thing I saw was the pale, almost silvery skin of his throat, the arc of his chin above my face. His jaw was taut. I propped myself up on my elbow so I could see his face.

He was staring at the frothy canopy above us, and he didn’t look at me as I studied his grave features. His expression was a shock—it sent a physical jolt through my body.

“Edward,” I said, a strange little catch in my throat, “what is it? What’s wrong?”

“You have to ask?” His voice was hard, cynical.

My first instinct, the product of a lifetime of insecurities, was to wonder what I had done wrong. I thought through everything that had happened, but I couldn't find any sour note in the memory. It had all been simpler than I'd expected; we'd fit together like corresponding pieces, made to match up. This had given me a secret satisfaction—we were compatible physically, as well as all the other ways. Fire and ice, somehow existing together without destroying each other. More proof that I belonged with him. I couldn't think of any part that would make him look like this—so severe and cold. What had I missed?

His finger smoothed the worried lines on my forehead.

"What are you thinking?" he whispered.

"You're upset. I don't understand. Did I… ?" I couldn't finish. His eyes tightened. "How badly are you hurt, Bella? The truth—don't try to downplay it."

"Hurt?" I repeated; my voice came out higher than usual because the word took me so by surprise.

He raised one eyebrow, his lips a tight line.

I made a quick assessment, stretching my body automatically, tensing and flexing my muscles. There was stiffness, and a lot of soreness, too, it was true, but mostly there was the odd sensation that my bones all had become unhinged at the joints, and I had changed halfway into the consistency of a jellyfish. It was not an unpleasant feeling. And then I was a little angry, because he was darkening this most perfect of all mornings with his pessimistic assumptions.

"Why would you jump to that conclusion? I've never been better than I am now."

His eyes closed. "Stop that."

"Stop what?"

"Stop acting like I'm not a monster for having agreed to this."

"Edward!" I whispered, really upset now. He was pulling my bright memory through the darkness, staining it. "Don't ever say that."

He didn't open his eyes; it was like he didn't want to see me.

"Look at yourself, Bella. Then tell me I'm not a monster."

Wounded, shocked, I followed his instruction unthinkingly and then gasped. What had happened to me? I couldn't make sense of the fluffy white snow that clung to my skin. I shook my head, and a cascade of white drifted out of my hair. I pinched one soft white bit between my fingers. It was a piece of down.

"Why am I covered in feathers?" I asked, confused.

He exhaled impatiently. "I bit a pillow. Or two. That's not what I'm talking about."

"You… bit a pillow? Why? "

"Look, Bella!" he almost growled. He took my hand—very gingerly—and stretched my arm out. "Look at that."

This time, I saw what he meant.

Under the dusting of feathers, large purplish bruises were beginning to blossom across the pale skin of my arm. My eyes followed the trail they made up to my shoulder, and then down across my ribs. I pulled my hand free to poke at a discoloration on my left forearm, watching it fade where I touched and then reappear. It throbbed a little. So lightly that he was barely touching me, Edward placed his hand against the bruises on my arm, one at a time, matching his long fingers to the patterns.

"Oh," I said.

I tried to remember this—to remember pain—but I couldn't. I couldn't recall a moment when his hold had been too tight, his hands too hard against me. I only remembered wanting him to hold me tighter, and being pleased when he did....

"I'm… so sorry, Bella," he whispered while I stared at the bruises. "I knew better than this. I should not have—" He made a low, revolted sound in the back of his throat. "I am more sorry than I can tell you."

He threw his arm over his face and became perfectly still.

I sat for one long moment in total astonishment, trying to come to terms—now that I understood it—with his misery. It was so contrary to the way that I felt that it was difficult to process.

The shock wore off slowly, leaving nothing in its absence. Emptiness. My mind was blank. I couldn't

think of what to say. How could I explain it to him in the right way?

How could I make him as happy as I was—or as I had been, a moment ago?

I touched his arm, and he didn't respond. I wrapped my fingers around his wrist and tried to pry his arm off his face, but I could have been yanking on a sculpture for all the good it did me.

"Edward."

He didn't move.

"Edward?"

Nothing. So, this would be a monologue, then.

"I'm not sorry, Edward. I'm… I can't even tell you. I'm so happy. That doesn't cover it. Don't be angry. Don't. I'm really f—"

"Do not say the word fine." His voice was ice cold. "If you value my sanity, do not say that you are fine."

"But I am," I whispered.

"Bella," he almost moaned. "Don't."

"No. You don't, Edward."

He moved his arm; his gold eyes watched me warily.

"Don't ruin this," I told him. "I. Am. Happy."

"I've already ruined this," he whispered.

"Cut it out," I snapped.

I heard his teeth grind together.

"Ugh!" I groaned. "Why can't you just read my mind already? It's so inconvenient to be a mental mute!"

His eyes widened a little bit, distracted in spite of himself.

"That's a new one. You love that I can't read your mind."

"Not today."

He stared at me. "Why?"

I threw my hands up in frustration, feeling an ache in my shoulder that I ignored. My palms fell back against his chest with a sharp smack. "Because all this angst would be completely unnecessary if you could see how I feel right now! Or five minutes ago, anyway. I was perfectly happy. Totally and completely blissed out. Now—well, I'm sort of pissed, actually."

"You should be angry at me."

"Well, I am. Does that make you feel better?"

He sighed. "No. I don't think anything could make me feel better now."

"That," I snapped. "That right there is why I'm angry. You are killing my buzz, Edward."

He rolled his eyes and shook his head.

I took a deep breath. I was feeling more of the soreness now, but it wasn't that bad. Sort of like the day after lifting weights. I'd done that with Renée

during one of her fitness obsessions. Sixty-five lunges with ten pounds in each hand. I couldn't walk the next day. This was not as painful as that had been by half.

I swallowed my irritation and tried to make my voice soothing. "We knew this was going to be tricky. I thought that was assumed. And then—well, it was a lot easier than I thought it would be. And this is really nothing." I brushed my fingers along my arm. "I think for a first time, not knowing what to expect, we did amazing. With a little practice

—"

His expression was suddenly so livid that I broke off mid-sentence.

"Assumed? Did you expect this, Bella? Were you anticipating that I would hurt you?

Were you thinking it would be worse? Do you consider the experiment a success because you can walk away from it? No broken bones—that equals a victory?"

I waited, letting him get it all out. Then I waited some more while his breathing went back to normal. When his eyes were calm, I answered, speaking with slow precision.

"I didn't know what to expect—but I definitely did not expect how… how… just wonderful and perfect it was." My voice dropped to a whisper, my eyes slipped from his face down to my hands. "I mean, I don't know how it was for you, but it was like that for me."

A cool finger pulled my chin back up.

"Is that what you're worried about?" he said through his teeth. "That I didn't enjoy myself?"

My eyes stayed down. "I know it's not the same. You're not human. I just was trying to explain that, for a human, well, I can't imagine that life gets any better than that."

He was quiet for so long that, finally, I had to look up. His face was softer now, thoughtful.

"It seems that I have more to apologize for." He frowned. "I didn't dream that you would construe the way I feel about what I did to you to mean that last night wasn't…

well, the best night of my existence. But I don't want to think of it that way, not when you were . . ."

My lips curved up a little at the edges. "Really? The best ever?" I asked in a small voice.

He took my face between his hands, still introspective. "I spoke to Carlisle after you and I made our bargain, hoping he could help me. Of course he warned me that this would be very dangerous for you." A shadow crossed his expression. "He had faith in me, though—faith I didn't deserve."

I started to protest, and he put two fingers over my lips before I could comment.

"I also asked him what I should expect. I didn't know what it would be for me… what with my being a vampire." He smiled halfheartedly. "Carlisle told me it

was a very powerful thing, like nothing else. He told me physical love was something I should not treat lightly. With our rarely changing temperaments, strong emotions can alter us in permanent ways. But he said I did not need to worry about that part—you had already altered me so completely." This time his smile was more genuine.

"I spoke to my brothers, too. They told me it was a very great pleasure. Second only to drinking human blood." A line creased his brow. "But I've tasted your blood, and there could be no blood more potent than that. … I don't think they were wrong, really. Just that it was different for us. Something more."

"It was more. It was everything."

"That doesn't change the fact that it was wrong. Even if it were possible that you really did feel that way."

"What does that mean? Do you think I'm making this up? Why?"

"To ease my guilt. I can't ignore the evidence, Bella. Or your history of trying to let me off the hook when I make mistakes."

I grabbed his chin and leaned forward so that our faces were inches apart. "You listen to me, Edward Cullen. I am not pretending anything for your sake, okay? I didn't even know there was a reason to make you feel better until you started being all miserable. I've never been so happy in all my life—I wasn't this happy when you decided that you loved me more than you wanted to kill me, or the first morning I woke up and you were there waiting for me.… Not when I

heard your voice in the ballet studio"—he flinched at the old memory of my close call with a hunting vampire, but I didn't pause—"or when you said 'I do' and I realized that, somehow, I get to keep you forever. Those are the happiest memories I have, and this is better than any of it. So just deal with it."

He touched the frown line between my eyebrows. "I'm making you unhappy now. I don't want to do that."

"Then don't you be unhappy. That's the only thing that's wrong here."

His eyes tightened, then he took a deep breath and nodded. "You're right. The past is past and I can't do anything to change it. There's no sense in letting my mood sour this time for you. I'll do whatever I can to make you happy now."

I examined his face suspiciously, and he gave me a serene smile.

"Whatever makes me happy?"

My stomach growled at the same time that I asked.

"You're hungry," he said quickly. He was swiftly out of the bed, stirring up a cloud of feathers. Which reminded me.

"So, why exactly did you decide to ruin Esme's pillows?" I asked, sitting up and shaking more down from my hair.

He had already pulled on a pair of loose khaki pants, and he stood by the door, rumpling his hair, dislodging a few feathers of his own.

"I don't know if I decided to do anything last night," he muttered. "We're just lucky it was the pillows and not you." He inhaled deeply and then shook his head, as if shaking off the dark thought. A very authentic-looking smile spread across his face, but I guessed it took a lot of work to put it there.

I slid carefully off the high bed and stretched again, more aware, now, of the aches and sore spots. I heard him gasp. He turned away from me, and his hands balled up, knuckles white.

"Do I look that hideous?" I asked, working to keep my tone light. His breath caught, but he didn't turn, probably to hide his expression from me. I walked to the bathroom to check for myself.

I stared at my naked body in the full-length mirror behind the door. I'd definitely had worse. There was a faint shadow across one of my cheekbones, and my lips were a little swollen, but other than that, my face was fine. The rest of me was decorated with patches of blue and purple. I concentrated on the bruises that would be the hardest to hide—my arms and my shoulders. They weren't so bad. My skin marked up easily. By the time a bruise showed I'd usually forgotten how I'd come by it. Of course, these were just developing. I'd look even worse tomorrow. That would not make things any easier.

I looked at my hair, then, and groaned.

"Bella?" He was right there behind me as soon as I'd made a sound.

“I’ll never get this all out of my hair!” I pointed to my head, where it looked like a chicken was nesting. I started picking at the feathers.

“You would be worried about your hair,” he mumbled, but he came to stand behind me, pulling out the feathers much more quickly.

“How did you keep from laughing at this? I look ridiculous.”

He didn’t answer; he just kept plucking. And I knew the answer anyway—there was nothing that would be funny to him in this mood.

“This isn’t going to work,” I sighed after a minute. “It’s all dried in. I’m going to have to try to wash it out.” I turned around, wrapping my arms around his cool waist. “Do you want to help me?”

“I’d better find some food for you,” he said in a quiet voice, and he gently unwound my arms. I sighed as he disappeared, moving too fast.

It looked like my honeymoon was over. The thought put a big lump in my throat. When I was mostly feather-free and dressed in an unfamiliar white cotton dress that concealed the worst of the violet blotches, I padded off barefoot to where the smell of eggs and bacon and cheddar cheese was coming from.

Edward stood in front of the stainless steel stove, sliding an omelet onto the light blue plate waiting on the counter. The scent of the food overwhelmed me. I felt like I could eat the plate and the frying pan, too; my stomach snarled.

“Here,” he said. He turned with a smile on his face and set the plate on a small tiled table.

I sat in one of the two metal chairs and started snarfing down the hot eggs. They burned my throat, but I didn’t care.

He sat down across from me. “I’m not feeding you often enough.”

I swallowed and then reminded him, “I was asleep. This is really good, by the way. Impressive for someone who doesn’t eat.”

“Food Network,” he said, flashing my favorite crooked smile.

I was happy to see it, happy that he seemed more like his normal self.

“Where did the eggs come from?”

“I asked the cleaning crew to stock the kitchen. A first, for this place. I’ll have to ask them to deal with the feathers.... ” He trailed off, his gaze fixed on a space above my head. I didn’t respond, trying to avoid saying anything that would upset him again. I ate everything, though he’d made enough for two.

“Thank you,” I told him. I leaned across the table to kiss him. He kissed me back automatically, and then suddenly stiffened and leaned away.

I gritted my teeth, and the question I meant to ask came out sounding like an accusation.

"You aren't going to touch me again while we're here, are you?"

He hesitated, then half-smiled and raised his hand to stroke my cheek. His fingers lingered softly on my skin, and I couldn't help leaning my face into his palm.

"You know that's not what I meant."

He sighed and dropped his hand. "I know. And you're right." He paused, lifting his chin slightly. And then he spoke again with firm conviction. "I will not make love with you until you've been changed. I will never hurt you again."

# Chapter 6

## DISTRACTIONS

My entertainment became the number-one priority on Isle Esme. We snorkeled (well, I snorkeled while he flaunted his ability to go without oxygen indefinitely). We explored the small jungle that ringed the rocky little peak. We visited the parrots that lived in the canopy on the south end of the island. We watched the sunset from the rocky western cove. We swam with the porpoises that played in the warm, shallow waters there. Or at least I did; when Edward was in the water, the porpoises disappeared as if a shark was near.

I knew what was going on. He was trying to keep me busy, distracted, so I that wouldn't continue badgering him about the sex thing. Whenever I tried to talk him into taking it easy with one of the million DVDs under the big-screen plasma TV, he would lure me out of the house with magic words like coral reefs and submerged caves and sea turtles. We were going, going, going all day, so that I found myself completely famished and exhausted when the sun eventually set.

I drooped over my plate after I finished dinner every night; once I'd actually fallen asleep right at the table and he'd had to carry me to bed. Part of it was that Edward always made too much food for one, but I was so hungry after swimming and climbing all day that I ate most of it. Then, full and worn out, I could barely keep my eyes open. All part of the plan, no doubt.

Exhaustion didn't help much with my attempts at persuasion. But I didn't give up. I tried reasoning, pleading, and grouching, all to no avail. I was usually unconscious before I could really press my case far. And then my dreams felt so real—nightmares mostly, made more vivid, I guessed, by the too-bright colors of the island—that I woke up tired no matter how long I slept.

About a week or so after we'd gotten to the island, I decided to try compromise. It had worked for us in the past.

I was sleeping in the blue room now. The cleaning crew wasn't due until the next day, and so the white room still had a snowy blanket of down. The blue room was smaller, the bed more reasonably proportioned. The walls were dark, paneled in teak, and the fittings were all luxurious blue silk.

I'd taken to wearing some of Alice's lingerie collection to sleep in at night—which weren't so revealing compared to the scanty bikinis she'd packed for me when it came right down to it. I wondered if she'd seen a vision of why I would want such things, and then shuddered, embarrassed by that thought.

I'd started out slow with innocent ivory satins, worried that revealing more of my skin would be the opposite of helpful, but ready to try anything. Edward seemed to notice nothing, as if I were wearing the same ratty old sweats I wore at home. The bruises were much better now—yellowing in some places and disappearing altogether in others—so tonight I pulled out one of the scarier pieces as I got ready in the

paneled bathroom. It was black, lacy, and embarrassing to look at even when it wasn't on. I was careful not to look in the mirror before I went back to the bedroom. I didn't want to lose my nerve.

I had the satisfaction of watching his eyes pop open wide for just a second before he controlled his expression.

"What do you think?" I asked, pirouetting so that he could see every angle. He cleared his throat. "You look beautiful. You always do."

"Thanks," I said a bit sourly.

I was too tired to resist climbing quickly into the soft bed. He put his arms around me and pulled me against his chest, but this was routine—it was too hot to sleep without his cool body close.

"I'll make you a deal," I said sleepily.

"I will not make any deals with you," he answered.

"You haven't even heard what I'm offering."

"It doesn't matter."

I sighed. "Dang it. And I really wanted... Oh well."

He rolled his eyes.

I closed mine and let the bait sit there. I yawned.

It took only a minute—not long enough for me to zonk out.

"All right. What is it you want?"

I gritted my teeth for a second, fighting a smile. If there was one thing he couldn't resist, it was an opportunity to give me something.

"Well, I was thinking… I know that the whole Dartmouth thing was just supposed to be a cover story, but honestly, one semester of college probably wouldn't kill me," I said, echoing his words from long ago, when he'd tried to persuade me to put off becoming a vampire. "Charlie would get a thrill out of Dartmouth stories, I bet. Sure, it might be embarrassing if I can't keep up with all the brainiacs. Still… eighteen, nineteen. It's really not such a big difference. It's not like I'm going to get crow's feet in the next year."

He was silent for a long moment. Then, in a low voice, he said, "You would wait. You would stay human."

I held my tongue, letting the offer sink in.

"Why are you doing this to me?" he said through his teeth, his tone suddenly angry.

"Isn't it hard enough without all of this?" He grabbed a handful of lace that was ruffled on my thigh. For a moment, I thought he was going to rip it from the seam. Then his hand relaxed. "It doesn't matter. I won't make any deals with you."

"I want to go to college."

"No, you don't. And there is nothing that is worth risking your life again. That's worth hurting you."

"But I do want to go. Well, it's not college as much as it's that I want—I want to be human a little while longer."

He closed his eyes and exhaled through his nose. "You are making me insane, Bella. Haven't we had this argument a million times, you always begging to be a vampire without delay?"

"Yes, but... well, I have a reason to be human that I didn't have before."

"What's that?"

"Guess," I said, and I dragged myself off the pillows to kiss him. He kissed me back, but not in a way that made me think I was winning. It was more like he was being careful not to hurt my feelings; he was completely, maddeningly in control of himself. Gently, he pulled me away after a moment and cradled me against his chest.

"You are so human, Bella. Ruled by your hormones." He chuckled.

"That's the whole point, Edward. I like this part of being human. I don't want to give it up yet. I don't want to wait through years of being a blood-crazed newborn for some part of this to come back to me."

I yawned, and he smiled.

"You're tired. Sleep, love." He started humming the lullaby he'd composed for me when we first met.

"I wonder why I'm so tired," I muttered sarcastically. "That couldn't be part of your scheme or anything."

He just chuckled once and went back to humming.

“For as tired as I’ve been, you’d think I’d sleep better.”

The song broke off. “You’ve been sleeping like the dead, Bella. You haven’t said a word in your sleep since we got here. If it weren’t for the snoring, I’d worry you were slipping into a coma.”

I ignored the snoring jibe; I didn’t snore. “I haven’t been tossing? That’s weird. Usually I’m all over the bed when I’m having nightmares. And shouting.”

“You’ve been having nightmares?”

“Vivid ones. They make me so tired.” I yawned. “I can’t believe I haven’t been babbling about them all night.”

“What are they about?”

“Different things—but the same, you know, because of the colors.”

“Colors?”

“It’s all so bright and real. Usually, when I’m dreaming, I know that I am. With these, I don’t know I’m asleep. It makes them scarier.”

He sounded disturbed when he spoke again. “What is frightening you?”

I shuddered slightly. “Mostly . . .” I hesitated.

“Mostly?” he prompted.

I wasn’t sure why, but I didn’t want to tell him about the child in my recurring nightmare; there was

something private about that particular horror. So, instead of giving him the full description, I gave him just one element. Certainly enough to frighten me or anyone else.

“The Volturi,” I whispered.

He hugged me tighter. “They aren’t going to bother us anymore. You’ll be immortal soon, and they’ll have no reason.”

I let him comfort me, feeling a little guilty that he’d misunderstood. The nightmares weren’t like that, exactly. It wasn’t that I was afraid for myself—I was afraid for the boy.

He wasn’t the same boy as that first dream—the vampire child with the bloodred eyes who sat on a pile of dead people I loved. This boy I’d dreamed of four times in the last week was definitely human; his cheeks were flushed and his wide eyes were a soft green. But just like the other child, he shook with fear and desperation as the Volturi closed in on us.

In this dream that was both new and old, I simply had to protect the unknown child. There was no other option. At the same time, I knew that I would fail. He saw the desolation on my face. “What can I do to help?”

I shook it off. “They’re just dreams, Edward.”

“Do you want me to sing to you? I’ll sing all night if it will keep the bad dreams away.”

“They’re not all bad. Some are nice. So… colorful. Underwater, with the fish and the coral. It all seems

like it's really happening—I don't know that I'm dreaming. Maybe this island is the problem. It's really bright here."

"Do you want to go home?"

"No. No, not yet. Can't we stay awhile longer?"

"We can stay as long as you want, Bella," he promised me.

"When does the semester start? I wasn't paying attention before."

He sighed. He may have started humming again, too, but I was under before I could be sure.

Later, when I awoke in the dark, it was with shock. The dream had been so very real…

so vivid, so sensory…. I gasped aloud, now, disoriented by the dark room. Only a second ago, it seemed, I had been under the brilliant sun.

"Bella?" Edward whispered, his arms tight around me, shaking me gently. "Are you all right, sweetheart?"

"Oh," I gasped again. Just a dream. Not real. To my utter astonishment, tears overflowed from my eyes without warning, gushing down my face.

"Bella!" he said—louder, alarmed now. "What's wrong?" He wiped the tears from my hot cheeks with cold, frantic fingers, but others followed.

"It was only a dream." I couldn't contain the low sob that broke in my voice. The senseless tears were

disturbing, but I couldn't get control of the staggering grief that gripped me. I wanted so badly for the dream to be real.

"It's okay, love, you're fine. I'm here." He rocked me back and forth, a little too fast to soothe. "Did you have another nightmare? It wasn't real, it wasn't real."

"Not a nightmare." I shook my head, scrubbing the back of my hand against my eyes.

"It was a good dream." My voice broke again.

"Then why are you crying?" he asked, bewildered.

"Because I woke up," I wailed, wrapping my arms around his neck in a chokehold and sobbing into his throat.

He laughed once at my logic, but the sound was tense with concern.

"Everything's all right, Bella. Take deep breaths."

"It was so real," I cried. "I wanted it to be real."

"Tell me about it," he urged. "Maybe that will help."

"We were on the beach. . . ." I trailed off, pulling back to look with tear-filled eyes at his anxious angel's face, dim in the darkness. I stared at him broodingly as the unreasonable grief began to ebb.

"And?" he finally prompted.

I blinked the tears out of my eyes, torn. "Oh, Edward . . ."

“Tell me, Bella,” he pleaded, eyes wild with worry at the pain in my voice. But I couldn’t. Instead I clutched my arms around his neck again and locked my mouth with his feverishly. It wasn’t desire at all—it was need, acute to the point of pain. His response was instant but quickly followed by his rebuff.

He struggled with me as gently as he could in his surprise, holding me away, grasping my shoulders.

“No, Bella,” he insisted, looking at me as if he was worried that I’d lost my mind. My arms dropped, defeated, the bizarre tears spilling in a fresh torrent down my face, a new sob rising in my throat. He was right—I must be crazy.

He stared at me with confused, anguished eyes.

“I’m s-s-s-orry,” I mumbled.

But he pulled me to him then, hugging me tightly to his marble chest.

“I can’t, Bella, I can’t!” His moan was agonized.

“Please,” I said, my plea muffled against his skin. “Please, Edward?”

I couldn’t tell if he was moved by the tears trembling in my voice, or if he was unprepared to deal with the suddenness of my attack, or if his need was simply as unbearable in that moment as my own. But whatever the reason, he pulled my lips back to his, surrendering with a groan.

And we began where my dream had left off.

I stayed very still when I woke up in the morning and tried to keep my breathing even. I was afraid to open my eyes.

I was lying across Edward's chest, but he was very still and his arms were not wrapped around me. That was a bad sign. I was afraid to admit I was awake and face his anger—

no matter whom it was directed at today.

Carefully, I peeked through my eyelashes. He was staring up at the dark ceiling, his arms behind his head. I pulled myself up on my elbow so that I could see his face better. It was smooth, expressionless.

"How much trouble am I in?" I asked in a small voice.

"Heaps," he said, but turned his head and smirked at me.

I breathed a sigh of relief. "I am sorry," I said. "I didn't mean… Well, I don't know exactly what that was last night." I shook my head at the memory of the irrational tears, the crushing grief.

"You never did tell me what your dream was about."

"I guess I didn't—but I sort of showed you what it was about." I laughed nervously.

"Oh," he said. His eyes widened, and then he blinked. "Interesting."

"It was a very good dream," I murmured. He didn't comment, so a few seconds later I asked, "Am I forgiven?"

“I’m thinking about it.”

I sat up, planning to examine myself—there didn’t seem to be any feathers, at least. But as I moved, an odd wave of vertigo hit. I swayed and fell back against the pillows.

“Whoa… head rush.”

His arms were around me then. “You slept for a long time. Twelve hours.”

“Twelve?” How strange.

I gave myself a quick once-over while I spoke, trying to be inconspicuous about it. I looked fine. The bruises on my arms were still a week old, yellowing. I stretched experimentally. I felt fine, too. Well, better than fine, actually.

“Is the inventory complete?”

I nodded sheepishly. “The pillows all appear to have survived.”

“Unfortunately, I can’t say the same for your, er, nightgown.” He nodded toward the foot of the bed, where several scraps of black lace were strewn across the silk sheets.

“That’s too bad,” I said. “I liked that one.”

“I did, too.”

“Were there any other casualties?” I asked timidly.

“I’ll have to buy Esme a new bed frame,” he confessed, glancing over his shoulder. I followed his

gaze and was shocked to see that large chunks of wood had apparently been gouged from the left side of the headboard.

“Hmm.” I frowned. “You’d think I would have heard that.”

“You seem to be extraordinarily unobservant when your attention is otherwise involved.”

“I was a bit absorbed,” I admitted, blushing a deep red.

He touched my burning cheek and sighed. “I’m really going to miss that.”

I stared at his face, searching for any signs of the anger or remorse I feared. He gazed back at me evenly, his expression calm but otherwise unreadable.

“How are you feeling?”

He laughed.

“What?” I demanded.

“You look so guilty—like you’ve committed a crime.”

“I feel guilty,” I muttered.

“So you seduced your all-too-willing husband. That’s not a capital offense.”

He seemed to be teasing.

My cheeks got hotter. “The word seduced implies a certain amount of premeditation.”

“Maybe that was the wrong word,” he allowed.

"You're not angry?"

He smiled ruefully. "I'm not angry."

"Why not?"

"Well . . ." He paused. "I didn't hurt you, for one thing. It was easier this time, to control myself, to channel the excesses." His eyes flickered to the damaged frame again.

"Maybe because I had a better idea of what to expect."

A hopeful smile started to spread across my face. "I told you that it was all about practice."

He rolled his eyes.

My stomach growled, and he laughed. "Breakfast time for the human?" he asked.

"Please," I said, hopping out of bed. I moved too quickly, though, and had to stagger drunkenly to regain my balance. He caught me before I could stumble into the dresser.

"Are you all right?"

"If I don't have a better sense of equilibrium in my next life, I'm demanding a refund."

I cooked this morning, frying up some eggs—too hungry to do anything more elaborate. Impatient, I flipped them onto a plate after just a few minutes.

"Since when do you eat eggs sunny-side up?" he asked.

"Since now."

“Do you know how many eggs you’ve gone through in the last week?” He pulled the trash bin out from under the sink—it was full of empty blue cartons.

“Weird,” I said after swallowing a scorching bite. “This place is messing with my appetite.” And my dreams, and my already dubious balance. “But I like it here. We’ll probably have to leave soon, though, won’t we, to make it to Dartmouth in time? Wow, I guess we need to find a place to live and stuff, too.”

He sat down next to me. “You can give up the college pretense now—you’ve gotten what you wanted. And we didn’t agree to a deal, so there are no strings attached.”

I snorted. “It wasn’t a pretense, Edward. I don’t spend my free time plotting like some people do. What can we do to wear Bella out today? ” I said in a poor impression of his voice. He laughed, unashamed. “I really do want a little more time being human.” I leaned over to run my hand across his bare chest. “I have not had enough.”

He gave me a dubious look. “For this?” he asked, catching my hand as it moved down his stomach. “Sex was the key all along?” He rolled his eyes. “Why didn’t I think of that?” he muttered sarcastically. “I could have saved myself a lot of arguments.”

I laughed. “Yeah, probably.”

“You are so human,” he said again.

“I know.”

A hint of a smile pulled at his lips. “We’re going to Dartmouth? Really?”

“I’ll probably fail out in one semester.”

“I’ll tutor you.” The smile was wide now. “You’re going to love college.”

“Do you think we can find an apartment this late?”

He grimaced, looking guilty. “Well, we sort of already have a house there. You know, just in case.”

“You bought a house?”

“Real estate is a good investment.”

I raised one eyebrow and then let it go. “So we’re ready, then.”

“I’ll have to see if we can keep your ‘before’ car for a little longer. . . .”

“Yes, heaven forbid I not be protected from tanks.”

He grinned.

“How much longer can we stay?” I asked.

“We’re fine on time. A few more weeks, if you want. And then we can visit Charlie before we go to New Hampshire. We could spend Christmas with Renée. . . .”

His words painted a very happy immediate future, one free of pain for everyone involved. The Jacob-drawer, all but forgotten, rattled, and I amended the thought—for almost everyone.

This wasn't getting any easier. Now that I'd discovered exactly how good being human could be, it was tempting to let my plans drift. Eighteen or nineteen, nineteen or twenty… Did it really matter? I wouldn't change so much in a year. And being human with Edward… The choice got trickier every day.

"A few weeks," I agreed. And then, because there never seemed to be enough time, I added, "So I was thinking—you know what I was saying about practice before?"

He laughed. "Can you hold on to that thought? I hear a boat. The cleaning crew must be here."

He wanted me to hold on to that thought. So did that mean he was not going to give me any more trouble about practicing? I smiled.

"Let me explain the mess in the white room to Gustavo, and then we can go out. There's a place in the jungle on the south—"

"I don't want to go out. I am not hiking all over the island today. I want to stay here and watch a movie."

He pursed his lips, trying not to laugh at my disgruntled tone. "All right, whatever you'd like. Why don't you pick one out while I get the door?"

"I didn't hear a knock."

He cocked his head to the side, listening. A half second later, a faint, timid rap on the door sounded. He grinned and turned for the hallway.

I wandered over to the shelves under the big TV and started scanning through the titles. It was hard to decide where to begin. They had more DVDs than a rental store. I could hear Edward's low, velvet voice as he came back down the hall, conversing fluidly in what I assumed was perfect Portuguese. Another, harsher, human voice answered in the same tongue.

Edward led them into the room, pointing toward the kitchen on his way. The two Brazilians looked incredibly short and dark next to him. One was a round man, the other a slight female, both their faces creased with lines. Edward gestured to me with a proud smile, and I heard my name mixed in with a flurry of unfamiliar words. I flushed a little as I thought of the downy mess in the white room, which they would soon encounter. The little man smiled at me politely.

But the tiny coffee-skinned woman didn't smile. She stared at me with a mixture of shock, worry, and most of all, wide-eyed fear. Before I could react, Edward motioned for them to follow him toward the chicken coop, and they were gone. When he reappeared, he was alone. He walked swiftly to my side and wrapped his arms around me.

"What's with her?" I whispered urgently, remembering her panicked expression. He shrugged, unperturbed. "Kaure's part Ticuna Indian. She was raised to be more superstitious—or you could call it more aware—than those who live in the modern world. She suspects what I am, or close enough." He still didn't sound worried. "They have their own legends here.

The Libishomen—a blood-drinking demon who preys exclusively on beautiful women.” He leered at me.

Beautiful women only? Well, that was kind of flattering.

“She looked terrified,” I said.

“She is—but mostly she’s worried about you.”

“Me?”

“She’s afraid of why I have you here, all alone.” He chuckled darkly and then looked toward the wall of movies. “Oh well, why don’t you choose something for us to watch?

That’s an acceptably human thing to do.”

“Yes, I’m sure a movie will convince her that you’re human.” I laughed and clasped my arms securely around his neck, stretching up on my tiptoes. He leaned down so that I could kiss him, and then his arms tightened around me, lifting me off the floor so he didn’t have to bend.

“Movie, schmovie,” I muttered as his lips moved down my throat, twisting my fingers in his bronze hair.

Then I heard a gasp, and he put me down abruptly. Kaure stood frozen in the hallway, feathers in her black hair, a large sack of more feathers in her arms, an expression of horror on her face. She stared at me, her eyes bugging out, as I blushed and looked down. Then she recovered herself and murmured something that, even in an unfamiliar language, was clearly an apology. Edward smiled and answered in a friendly

tone. She turned her dark eyes away and continued down the hall.

“She was thinking what I think she was thinking, wasn’t she?” I muttered. He laughed at my convoluted sentence. “Yes.”

“Here,” I said, reaching out at random and grabbing a movie. “Put this on and we can pretend to watch it.”

It was an old musical with smiling faces and fluffy dresses on the front.

“Very honeymoonish,” Edward approved.

While actors on the screen danced their way through a perky introduction song, I lolled on the sofa, snuggled into Edward’s arms.

“Will we move back into the white room now?” I wondered idly.

“I don’t know.... I’ve already mangled the headboard in the other room beyond repair—

maybe if we limit the destruction to one area of the house, Esme might invite us back someday.”

I smiled widely. “So there will be more destruction?”

He laughed at my expression. “I think it might be safer if it’s premeditated, rather than if I wait for you to assault me again.”

“It would only be a matter of time,” I agreed casually, but my pulse was racing in my veins.

“Is there something the matter with your heart?”

"Nope. Healthy as a horse." I paused. "Did you want to go survey the demolition zone now?"

"Maybe it would be more polite to wait until we're alone. You may not notice me tearing the furniture apart, but it would probably scare them."

In truth, I'd already forgotten the people in the other room. "Right. Drat."

Gustavo and Kaure moved quietly through the house while I waited impatiently for them to finish and tried to pay attention to the happily-ever-after on the screen. I was starting to get sleepy—though, according to Edward, I'd slept half the day—when a rough voice startled me. Edward sat up, keeping me cradled against him, and answered Gustavo in flowing Portuguese. Gustavo nodded and walked quietly toward the front door.

"They're finished," Edward told me.

"So that would mean that we're alone now?"

"How about lunch first?" he suggested.

I bit my lip, torn by the dilemma. I was pretty hungry. With a smile, he took my hand and led me to the kitchen. He knew my face so well, it didn't matter that he couldn't read my mind.

"This is getting out of hand," I complained when I finally felt full.

"Do you want to swim with the dolphins this afternoon—burn off the calories?" he asked.

“Maybe later. I had another idea for burning calories.”

“And what was that?”

“Well, there’s an awful lot of headboard left—”

But I didn’t finish. He’d already swept me up into his arms, and his lips silenced mine as he carried me with inhuman speed to the blue room.

# Chapter 7

## UNEXPECTED

The line of black advanced on me through the shroud-like mist. I could see their dark ruby eyes glinting with desire, lusting for the kill. Their lips pulled back over their sharp, wet teeth—some to snarl, some to smile.

I heard the child behind me whimper, but I couldn't turn to look at him. Though I was desperate to be sure that he was safe, I could not afford any lapse in focus now. They ghosted closer, their black robes billowing slightly with the movement. I saw their hands curl into bone-colored claws. They started to drift apart, angling to come at us from all sides. We were surrounded. We were going to die.

And then, like a burst of light from a flash, the whole scene was different. Yet nothing changed—the Volturi still stalked toward us, poised to kill. All that really changed was how the picture looked to me. Suddenly, I was hungry for it. I wanted them to charge. The panic changed to bloodlust as I crouched forward, a smile on my face, and a growl ripped through my bared teeth.

I jolted upright, shocked out of the dream.

The room was black. It was also steamy hot. Sweat matted my hair at the temples and rolled down my throat.

I groped the warm sheets and found them empty.

“Edward?”

Just then, my fingers encountered something smooth and flat and stiff. One sheet of paper, folded in half. I took the note with me and felt my way across the room to the light switch.

The outside of the note was addressed to Mrs. Cullen.

I’m hoping you won’t wake and notice my absence, but, if you should, I’ll be back very soon. I’ve just gone to the mainland to hunt. Go back to sleep and I’ll be here when you wake again. I love you.

I sighed. We’d been here about two weeks now, so I should have been expecting that he would have to leave, but I hadn’t been thinking about time. We seemed to exist outside of time here, just drifting along in a perfect state.

I wiped the sweat off my forehead. I felt absolutely wide awake, though the clock on the dresser said it was after one. I knew I would never be able to sleep as hot and sticky as I felt. Not to mention the fact that if I shut off the light and closed my eyes, I was sure to see those prowling black figures in my head.

I got up and wandered aimlessly through the dark house, flipping on lights. It felt so big and empty without Edward there. Different.

I ended up in the kitchen and decided that maybe comfort food was what I needed. I poked around in the fridge until I found all the ingredients for fried chicken. The popping and sizzling of the chicken in

the pan was a nice, homey sound; I felt less nervous while it filled the silence.

It smelled so good that I started eating it right out of the pan, burning my tongue in the process. By the fifth or sixth bite, though, it had cooled enough for me to taste it. My chewing slowed. Was there something off about the flavor? I checked the meat, and it was white all the way through, but I wondered if it was completely done. I took another experimental bite; I chewed twice. Ugh—definitely bad. I jumped up to spit it into the sink. Suddenly, the chicken-and-oil smell was revolting. I took the whole plate and shook it into the garbage, then opened the windows to chase away the scent. A coolish breeze had picked up outside. It felt good on my skin.

I was abruptly exhausted, but I didn't want to go back to the hot room. So I opened more windows in the TV room and lay on the couch right beneath them. I turned on the same movie we'd watched the other day and quickly fell asleep to the bright opening song.

When I opened my eyes again, the sun was halfway up the sky, but it was not the light that woke me. Cool arms were around me, pulling me against him. At the same time, a sudden pain twisted in my stomach, almost like the aftershock of catching a punch in the gut.

"I'm sorry," Edward was murmuring as he wiped a wintry hand across my clammy forehead. "So much for thoroughness. I didn't think about how hot you would be with me gone. I'll have an air conditioner installed before I leave again."

I couldn't concentrate on what he was saying. "Excuse me!" I gasped, struggling to get free of his arms.

He dropped his hold automatically. "Bella?"

I streaked for the bathroom with my hand clamped over my mouth. I felt so horrible that I didn't even care—at first—that he was with me while I crouched over the toilet and was violently sick.

"Bella? What's wrong?"

I couldn't answer yet. He held me anxiously, keeping my hair out of my face, waiting till I could breathe again.

"Damn rancid chicken," I moaned.

"Are you all right?" His voice was strained.

"Fine," I panted. "It's just food poisoning. You don't need to see this. Go away."

"Not likely, Bella."

"Go away," I moaned again, struggling to get up so I could rinse my mouth out. He helped me gently, ignoring the weak shoves I aimed at him.

After my mouth was clean, he carried me to the bed and sat me down carefully, supporting me with his arms.

"Food poisoning?"

"Yeah," I croaked. "I made some chicken last night. It tasted off, so I threw it out. But I ate a few bites first."

He put a cold hand on my forehead. It felt nice. “How do you feel now?”

I thought about that for a moment. The nausea had passed as suddenly as it had come, and I felt like I did any other morning. “Pretty normal. A little hungry, actually.”

He made me wait an hour and keep down a big glass of water before he fried me some eggs. I felt perfectly normal, just a little tired from being up in the middle of the night. He put on CNN—we’d been so out of touch, world war three could have broken out and we wouldn’t have known—and I lounged drowsily across his lap.

I got bored with the news and twisted around to kiss him. Just like this morning, a sharp pain hit my stomach when I moved. I lurched away from him, my hand tight over my mouth. I knew I’d never make it to the bathroom this time, so I ran to the kitchen sink. He held my hair again.

“Maybe we should go back to Rio, see a doctor,” he suggested anxiously when I was rinsing my mouth afterward.

I shook my head and edged toward the hallway. Doctors meant needles. “I’ll be fine right after I brush my teeth.”

When my mouth tasted better, I searched through my suitcase for the little first-aid kit Alice had packed for me, full of human things like bandages and painkillers and—my object now—Pepto-Bismol. Maybe I could settle my stomach and calm Edward

down. But before I found the Pepto, I happened across something else that Alice had packed for me. I picked up the small blue box and stared at it in my hand for a long moment, forgetting everything else.

Then I started counting in my head. Once. Twice. Again.

The knock startled me; the little box fell back into the suitcase.

“Are you well?” Edward asked through the door. “Did you get sick again?”

“Yes and no,” I said, but my voice sounded strangled.

“Bella? Can I please come in?” Worriedly now.

“O… kay?”

He came in and appraised my position, sitting cross-legged on the floor by the suitcase, and my expression, blank and staring. He sat next to me, his hand going to my forehead at once.

“What’s wrong?”

“How many days has it been since the wedding?” I whispered.

“Seventeen,” he answered automatically. “Bella, what is it?”

I was counting again. I held up a finger, cautioning him to wait, and mouthed the numbers to myself. I’d been wrong about the days before. We’d been here longer than I’d thought. I started over again.

"Bella!" he whispered urgently. "I'm losing my mind over here."

I tried to swallow. It didn't work. So I reached into the suitcase and fumbled around until I found the little blue box of tampons again. I held them up silently. He stared at me in confusion. "What? Are you trying to pass this illness off as PMS?"

"No," I managed to choke out. "No, Edward. I'm trying to tell you that my period is five days late."

His facial expression didn't change. It was like I hadn't spoken.

"I don't think I have food poisoning," I added.

He didn't respond. He had turned into a sculpture.

"The dreams," I mumbled to myself in a flat voice. "Sleeping so much. The crying. All that food. Oh. Oh. Oh."

Edward's stare seemed glassy, as if he couldn't see me anymore. Reflexively, almost involuntarily, my hand dropped to my stomach.

"Oh!" I squeaked again.

I lurched to my feet, slipping out of Edward's unmoving hands. I'd never changed out of the little silk shorts and camisole I'd worn to bed. I yanked the blue fabric out of the way and stared at my stomach.

"Impossible," I whispered.

I had absolutely no experience with pregnancy or babies or any part of that world, but I wasn't an idiot.

I'd seen enough movies and TV shows to know that this wasn't how it worked. I was only five days late. If I was pregnant, my body wouldn't even have registered that fact. I would not have morning sickness. I would not have changed my eating or sleeping habits.

And I most definitely would not have a small but defined bump sticking out between my hips.

I twisted my torso back and forth, examining it from every angle, as if it would disappear in exactly the right light. I ran my fingers over the subtle bulge, surprised by how rock hard it felt under my skin.

"Impossible," I said again, because, bulge or no bulge, period or no period (and there was definitely no period, though I'd never been late a day in my life), there was no way I could be pregnant. The only person I'd ever had sex with was a vampire, for crying out loud.

A vampire who was still frozen on the floor with no sign of ever moving again. So there had to be some other explanation, then. Something wrong with me. A strange South American disease with all the signs of pregnancy, only accelerated…

And then I remembered something—a morning of internet research that seemed a lifetime ago now. Sitting at the old desk in my room at Charlie's house with gray light glowing dully through the window, staring at my ancient, wheezing computer, reading avidly through a web-site called "Vampires A–Z." It had been less than twenty-four hours since Jacob Black, trying to entertain me with the Quileute

legends he didn't believe in yet, had told me that Edward was a vampire. I'd scanned anxiously through the first entries on the site, which was dedicated to vampire myths around the world. The Filipino Danag, the Hebrew Estrie, the Romanian Varacolaci, the Italian Stregoni benefici (a legend actually based on my new father-in-law's early exploits with the Volturi, not that I'd known anything about that at the time)… I'd paid less and less attention as the stories had grown more and more implausible. I only remembered vague bits of the later entries. They mostly seemed like excuses dreamed up to explain things like infant mortality rates—and infidelity. No, honey, I'm not having an affair! That sexy woman you saw sneaking out of the house was an evil succubus. I'm lucky I escaped with my life! (Of course, with what I knew now about Tanya and her sisters, I suspected that some of those excuses had been nothing but fact.) There had been one for the ladies, too. How can you accuse me of cheating on you—just because you've come home from a two-year sea voyage and I'm pregnant? It was the incubus. He hypnotized me with his mystical vampire powers….

That had been part of the definition of the incubus—the ability to father children with his hapless prey.

I shook my head, dazed. But…

I thought of Esme and especially Rosalie. Vampires couldn't have children. If it were possible, Rosalie would have found a way by now. The incubus myth was nothing but a fable.

Except that… well, there was a difference. Of course Rosalie could not conceive a child, because she was frozen in the state in which she passed from human to inhuman. Totally unchanging. And human women's bodies had to change to bear children. The constant change of a monthly cycle for one thing, and then the bigger changes needed to accommodate a growing child. Rosalie's body couldn't change.

But mine could. Mine did. I touched the bump on my stomach that had not been there yesterday.

And human men—well, they pretty much stayed the same from puberty to death. I remembered a random bit of trivia, gleaned from who knows where: Charlie Chaplin was in his seventies when he fathered his youngest child. Men had no such thing as child-bearing years or cycles of fertility.

Of course, how would anyone know if vampire men could father children, when their partners were not able? What vampire on earth would have the restraint necessary to test the theory with a human woman? Or the inclination?

I could think of only one.

Part of my head was sorting through fact and memory and speculation, while the other half—the part that controlled the ability to move even the smallest muscles—was stunned beyond the capacity for normal operations. I couldn't move my lips to speak, though I wanted to ask Edward to please explain to me what was going on. I needed to go back to where he sat, to touch him, but my body wouldn't follow instructions. I could only stare at my shocked eyes in

the mirror, my fingers gingerly pressed against the swelling on my torso.

And then, like in my vivid nightmare last night, the scene abruptly transformed. Everything I saw in the mirror looked completely different, though nothing actually was different.

What happened to change everything was that a soft little nudge bumped my hand—

from inside my body.

In the same moment, Edward's phone rang, shrill and demanding. Neither of us moved. It rang again and again. I tried to tune it out while I pressed my fingers to my stomach, waiting. In the mirror my expression was no longer bewildered—it was wondering now. I barely noticed when the strange, silent tears started streaming down my cheeks. The phone kept ringing. I wished Edward would answer it—I was having a moment. Possibly the biggest of my life.

Ring! Ring! Ring!

Finally, the annoyance broke through everything else. I got down on my knees next to Edward—I found myself moving more carefully, a thousand times more aware of the way each motion felt—and patted his pockets until I found the phone. I half-expected him to thaw out and answer it himself, but he was perfectly still. I recognized the number, and I could easily guess why she was calling.

"Hi, Alice," I said. My voice wasn't much better than before. I cleared my throat.

"Bella? Bella, are you okay?"

"Yeah. Um. Is Carlisle there?"

"He is. What's the problem?"

"I'm not… one hundred percent… sure. . . ."

"Is Edward all right?" she asked warily. She called Carlisle's name away from the phone and then demanded, "Why didn't he pick up the phone?" before I could answer her first question.

"I'm not sure."

"Bella, what's going on? I just saw—"

"What did you see?"

There was a silence. "Here's Carlisle," she finally said.

It felt like ice water had been injected in my veins. If Alice had seen a vision of me with a green-eyed, angel-faced child in my arms, she would have answered me, wouldn't she?

While I waited through the split second it took for Carlisle to speak, the vision I'd imagined for Alice danced behind my lids. A tiny, beautiful little baby, even more beautiful than the boy in my dream—a tiny Edward in my arms. Warmth shot through my veins, chasing the ice away.

"Bella, it's Carlisle. What's going on?"

"I—" I wasn't sure how to answer. Would he laugh at my conclusions, tell me I was crazy? Was I just

having another colorful dream? “I’m a little worried about Edward….

Can vampires go into shock?”

“Has he been harmed?” Carlisle’s voice was suddenly urgent.

“No, no,” I assured him. “Just… taken by surprise.”

“I don’t understand, Bella.”

“I think… well, I think that… maybe… I might be . . .” I took a deep breath.

“Pregnant.”

As if to back me up, there was another tiny nudge in my abdomen. My hand flew to my stomach.

After a long pause, Carlisle’s medical training kicked in.

“When was the first day of your last menstrual cycle?”

“Sixteen days before the wedding.” I’d done the mental math thoroughly enough just before to be able to answer with certainty.

“How do you feel?”

“Weird,” I told him, and my voice broke. Another trickle of tears dribbled down my cheeks. “This is going to sound crazy—look, I know it’s way too early for any of this. Maybe I am crazy. But I’m having bizarre dreams and eating all the time and crying and throwing up and… and… I swear something moved inside me just now.”

Edward's head snapped up.

I sighed in relief.

Edward held his hand out for the phone, his face white and hard.

"Um, I think Edward wants to talk to you."

"Put him on," Carlisle said in a strained voice.

Not entirely sure that Edward could talk, I put the phone in his outstretched hand. He pressed it to his ear. "Is it possible?" he whispered.

He listened for a long time, staring blankly at nothing.

"And Bella?" he asked. His arm wrapped around me as he spoke, pulling me close into his side.

He listened for what seemed like a long time and then said, "Yes. Yes, I will."

He pulled the phone away from his ear and pressed the "end" button. Right away, he dialed a new number.

"What did Carlisle say?" I asked impatiently.

Edward answered in a lifeless voice. "He thinks you're pregnant."

The words sent a warm shiver down my spine. The little nudger fluttered inside me.

"Who are you calling now?" I asked as he put the phone back to his ear.

"The airport. We're going home."

Edward was on the phone for more than an hour without a break. I guessed that he was arranging our flight home, but I couldn't be sure because he wasn't speaking English. It sounded like he was arguing; he spoke through his teeth a lot.

While he argued, he packed. He whirled around the room like an angry tornado, leaving order rather than destruction in his path. He threw a set of my clothes on the bed without looking at them, so I assumed it was time for me to get dressed. He continued with his argument while I changed, gesturing with sudden, agitated movements. When I could no longer bear the violent energy radiating out of him, I quietly left the room. His manic concentration made me sick to my stomach—not like the morning sickness, just uncomfortable. I would wait somewhere else for his mood to pass. I couldn't talk to this icy, focused Edward who honestly frightened me a little. Once again, I ended up in the kitchen. There was a bag of pretzels in the cupboard. I started chewing on them absently, staring out the window at the sand and rocks and trees and ocean, everything glittering in the sun.

Someone nudged me.

"I know," I said. "I don't want to go, either."

I stared out the window for a moment, but the nudger didn't respond.

"I don't understand," I whispered. "What is wrong here?"

Surprising, absolutely. Astonishing, even. But wrong?

No.

So why was Edward so furious? He was the one who had actually wished out loud for a shotgun wedding.

I tried to reason through it.

Maybe it wasn't so confusing that Edward wanted us to go home right away. He'd want Carlisle to check me out, make sure my assumption was right—though there was absolutely no doubt in my head at this point. Probably they'd want to figure out why I was already so pregnant, with the bump and the nudging and all of that. That wasn't normal.

Once I thought of this, I was sure I had it. He must be so worried about the baby. I hadn't gotten around to freaking out yet. My brain worked slower than his—it was still stuck marveling over the picture it had conjured up before: the tiny child with Edward's eyes—green, as his had been when he was human—lying fair and beautiful in my arms. I hoped he would have Edward's face exactly, with no interference from mine. It was funny how abruptly and entirely necessary this vision had become. From that first little touch, the whole world had shifted. Where before there was just one thing I could not live without, now there were two. There was no division—my love was not split between them now; it wasn't like that. It was more like my heart had grown, swollen up to twice its size in that moment. All that extra space, already filled. The increase was almost dizzying.

I'd never really understood Rosalie's pain and resentment before. I'd never imagined myself a mother, never wanted that. It had been a piece of

cake to promise Edward that I didn't care about giving up children for him, because I truly didn't. Children, in the abstract, had never appealed to me. They seemed to be loud creatures, often dripping some form of goo. I'd never had much to do with them. When I'd dreamed of Renée providing me with a brother, I'd always imagined an older brother. Someone to take care of me, rather than the other way around.

This child, Edward's child, was a whole different story.

I wanted him like I wanted air to breathe. Not a choice—a necessity. Maybe I just had a really bad imagination. Maybe that was why I'd been unable to imagine that I would like being married until after I already was—unable to see that I would want a baby until after one was already coming....

As I put my hand on my stomach, waiting for the next nudge, tears streaked down my cheeks again.

"Bella?"

I turned, made wary by the tone of his voice. It was too cold, too careful. His face matched his voice, empty and hard.

And then he saw that I was crying.

"Bella!" He crossed the room in a flash and put his hands on my face. "Are you in pain?"

"No, no—"

He pulled me against his chest. “Don’t be afraid. We’ll be home in sixteen hours. You’ll be fine. Carlisle will be ready when we get there. We’ll take care of this, and you’ll be fine, you’ll be fine.”

“Take care of this? What do you mean?”

He leaned away and looked me in the eye. “We’re going to get that thing out before it can hurt any part of you. Don’t be scared. I won’t let it hurt you.”

“That thing?” I gasped.

He looked sharply away from me, toward the front door. “Dammit! I forgot Gustavo was due today. I’ll get rid of him and be right back.” He darted out of the room. I clutched the counter for support. My knees were wobbly.

Edward had just called my little nudger a thing. He said Carlisle would get it out.

“No,” I whispered.

I’d gotten it wrong before. He didn’t care about the baby at all. He wanted to hurt him. The beautiful picture in my head shifted abruptly, changed into something dark. My pretty baby crying, my weak arms not enough to protect him….

What could I do? Would I be able to reason with them? What if I couldn’t? Did this explain Alice’s strange silence on the phone? Is that what she’d seen? Edward and Carlisle killing that pale, perfect child before he could live?

"No," I whispered again, my voice stronger. That could not be. I would not allow it. I heard Edward speaking Portuguese again. Arguing again. His voice got closer, and I heard him grunt in exasperation. Then I heard another voice, low and timid. A woman's voice.

He came into the kitchen ahead of her and went straight to me. He wiped the tears from my cheeks and murmured in my ear through the thin, hard line of his lips.

"She's insisting on leaving the food she brought—she made us dinner." If he had been less tense, less furious, I knew he would have rolled his eyes. "It's an excuse—she wants to make sure I haven't killed you yet." His voice went ice cold at the end. Kaure edged nervously around the corner with a covered dish in her hands. I wished I could speak Portuguese, or that my Spanish was less rudimentary, so that I could try to thank this woman who had dared to anger a vampire just to check on me. Her eyes flickered between the two of us. I saw her measuring the color in my face, the moisture in my eyes. Mumbling something I didn't understand, she put the dish on the counter.

Edward snapped something at her; I'd never heard him be so impolite before. She turned to go, and the whirling motion of her long skirt wafted the smell of the food into my face. It was strong—onions and fish. I gagged and whirled for the sink. I felt Edward's hands on my forehead and heard his soothing murmur through the roaring in my ears. His hands disappeared for a second, and I heard the refrigerator slam shut. Mercifully, the smell disappeared with the

sound, and Edward's hands were cooling my clammy face again. It was over quickly.

I rinsed my mouth in the tap while he caressed the side of my face. There was a tentative little nudge in my womb.

It's okay. We're okay, I thought toward the bump.

Edward turned me around, pulling me into his arms. I rested my head on his shoulder. My hands, instinctively, folded over my stomach.

I heard a little gasp and I looked up.

The woman was still there, hesitating in the doorway with her hands half-outstretched as if she had been looking for some way to help. Her eyes were locked on my hands, popping wide with shock. Her mouth hung open.

Then Edward gasped, too, and he suddenly turned to face the woman, pushing me slightly behind his body. His arm wrapped across my torso, like he was holding me back.

Suddenly, Kaure was shouting at him—loudly, furiously, her unintelligible words flying across the room like knives. She raised her tiny fist in the air and took two steps forward, shaking it at him. Despite her ferocity, it was easy to see the terror in her eyes. Edward stepped toward her, too, and I clutched at his arm, frightened for the woman. But when he interrupted her tirade, his voice took me by surprise, especially considering how sharp he'd been with her when she wasn't screeching at him. It was

low now; it was pleading. Not only that, but the sound was different, more guttural, the cadence off. I didn't think he was speaking Portuguese anymore.

For a moment, the woman stared at him in wonder, and then her eyes narrowed as she barked out a long question in the same alien tongue.

I watched as his face grew sad and serious, and he nodded once. She took a quick step back and crossed herself.

He reached out to her, gesturing toward me and then resting his hand against my cheek. She replied angrily again, waving her hands accusingly toward him, and then gestured to him. When she finished, he pleaded again with the same low, urgent voice. Her expression changed—she stared at him with doubt plain on her face as he spoke, her eyes repeatedly flashing to my confused face. He stopped speaking, and she seemed to be deliberating something. She looked back and forth between the two of us, and then, unconsciously it seemed, took a step forward.

She made a motion with her hands, miming a shape like a balloon jutting out from her stomach. I started—did her legends of the predatory blood-drinker include this? Could she possibly know something about what was growing inside me?

She walked a few steps forward deliberately this time and asked a few brief questions, which he responded to tensely. Then he became the questioner—one quick query. She hesitated and then slowly shook her head. When he spoke again, his voice was so agonized that I looked up at him in shock. His face was drawn with

pain. In answer, she walked slowly forward until she was close enough to lay her small hand on top of mine, over my stomach. She spoke one word in Portuguese.

"Morte," she sighed quietly. Then she turned, her shoulders bent as if the conversation had aged her, and left the room.

I knew enough Spanish for that one.

Edward was frozen again, staring after her with the tortured expression fixed on his face. A few moments later, I heard a boat's engine putter to life and then fade into the distance.

Edward did not move until I started for the bathroom. Then his hand caught my shoulder.

"Where are you going?" His voice was a whisper of pain.

"To brush my teeth again."

"Don't worry about what she said. It's nothing but legends, old lies for the sake of entertainment."

"I didn't understand anything," I told him, though it wasn't entirely true. As if I could discount something because it was a legend. My life was circled by legend on every side. They were all true.

"I packed your toothbrush. I'll get it for you."

He walked ahead of me to the bedroom.

"Are we leaving soon?" I called after him.

"As soon as you're done."

He waited for my toothbrush to repack it, pacing silently around the bedroom. I handed it to him when I was finished.

"I'll get the bags into the boat."

"Edward—"

He turned back. "Yes?"

I hesitated, trying to think of some way to get a few seconds alone. "Could you… pack some of the food? You know, in case I get hungry again."

"Of course," he said, his eyes suddenly soft. "Don't worry about anything. We'll get to Carlisle in just a few hours, really. This will all be over soon."

I nodded, not trusting my voice.

He turned and left the room, one big suitcase in each hand.

I whirled and scooped up the phone he'd left on the counter. It was very unlike him to forget things—to forget that Gustavo was coming, to leave his phone lying here. He was so stressed he was barely himself.

I flipped it open and scrolled through the preprogrammed numbers. I was glad he had the sound turned off, afraid that he would catch me. Would he be at the boat now? Or back already? Would he hear me from the kitchen if I whispered?

I found the number I wanted, one I had never called before in my life. I pressed the

“send” button and crossed my fingers.

“Hello?” the voice like golden wind chimes answered.

“Rosalie?” I whispered. “It’s Bella. Please. You have to help me.”

**BOOK TWO**

*Jacob*

*And yet, to say the truth,*

*reason and love keep little company together nowadays.*

William Shakespeare

*A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Act III, Scene i

# Preface

*Life sucks, and then you die.*

Yeah, I should be so lucky.

# Chapter 8

## WAITING FOR THE DAMN FIGHT TO START ALREADY

"Jeez, Paul, don't you freaking have a home of your own?"

Paul, lounging across *my* whole couch, watching some stupid baseball game on *my* crappy TV, just grinned at me and then—real slow—he lifted one Dorito from the bag in his lap and wedged it into his mouth in one piece.

"You better've brought those with you."

Crunch. "Nope," he said while chewing. "Your sister said to go ahead and help myself to anything I wanted."

I tried to make my voice sound like I wasn't about to punch him. "Is Rachel here now?"

It didn't work. He heard where I was going and shoved the bag behind his back. The bag crackled as he smashed it into the cushion. The chips crunched into pieces. Paul's hands came up in fists, close to his face like a boxer.

"Bring it, kid. I don't need Rachel to protect me."

I snorted. "Right. Like you wouldn't go crying to her first chance."

He laughed and relaxed into the sofa, dropping his hands. "I'm not going to go tattle to a girl. If you got in a lucky hit, that would be just between the two of us. And vice versa, right?"

Nice of him to give me an invitation. I made my body slump like I'd given up. "Right."

His eyes shifted to the TV.

I lunged.

His nose made a very satisfying crunching sound of its own when my fist connected. He tried to grab me, but I danced out of the way before he could find a hold, the ruined bag of Doritos in my left hand.

"You broke my nose, idiot."

"Just between us, right, Paul?"

I went to put the chips away. When I turned around, Paul was repositioning his nose before it could set crooked. The blood had already stopped; it looked like it had no source as it trickled down his lips and off his chin. He cussed, wincing as he pulled at the cartilage.

"You are such a pain, Jacob. I swear, I'd rather hang out with Leah."

"Ouch. Wow, I bet Leah's really going to love to hear that you want to spend some quality time with her. It'll just warm the cockles of her heart."

"You're going to forget I said that."

"Of course. I'm sure it won't slip out."

"Ugh," he grunted, and then settled back into the couch, wiping the leftover blood on the collar of his t-shirt. "You're fast, kid. I'll give you that." He turned his attention back to the fuzzy game.

I stood there for a second, and then I stalked off to my room, muttering about alien abductions.

Back in the day, you could count on Paul for a fight pretty much whenever. You didn't have to hit him then—any mild insult would do. It didn't take a lot to flip him out of control. Now, of course, when I really *wanted* a good snarling, ripping, break-the-treesdown match, he had to be all mellow. Wasn't it bad enough that yet another member of the pack had imprinted—because, really, that made four of ten now! When would it stop? Stupid myth was supposed to be *rare,* for crying out loud! All this mandatory love-at-first-sight was completely sickening!

Did it have to be *my* sister? Did it have to be *Paul*?

When Rachel'd come home from Washington State at the end of the summer semester

—graduated early, the nerd—my biggest worry'd been that it would be hard keeping the secret around her. I wasn't used to covering things up in my own home. It made me real sympathetic to kids like Embry and Collin, whose parents didn't know they were werewolves. Embry's mom thought he was going through some kind of rebellious stage. He was permanently grounded for constantly sneaking out, but, of course, there wasn't much he could do about that. She'd check his room every night, and every night it would be empty again. She'd yell and he'd take it in silence, and then go through it all again the next day. We'd tried to talk Sam into giving Embry a break and letting his mom in on the gig, but Embry'd said he didn't mind. The secret was too important. So I'd been all geared up to be keeping that secret. And then, two days after Rachel got home, Paul ran into her on the beach. Bada bing, bada boom—true love! No secrets necessary when you found your other half,

and all that imprinting werewolf garbage. Rachel got the whole story. And I got Paul as a brother-in-law someday. I knew Billy wasn't much thrilled about it, either. But he handled it better than I did. 'Course, he did escape to the Clearwaters' more often than usual these days. I didn't see where that was so much better. No Paul, but plenty of Leah.

I wondered—would a bullet through my temple actually kill me or just leave a really big mess for me to clean up?

I threw myself down on the bed. I was tired—hadn't slept since my last patrol—but I knew I wasn't going to sleep. My head was too crazy. The thoughts bounced around inside my skull like a disoriented swarm of bees. Noisy. Now and then they stung. Must be hornets, not bees. Bees died after one sting. And the same thoughts were stinging me again and again.

This waiting was driving me insane. It had been almost four weeks. I'd expected, one way or another, the news would have come by now. I'd sat up nights imagining what form it would take.

Charlie sobbing on the phone—Bella and her husband lost in an accident. A plane crash? That would be hard to fake. Unless the leeches didn't mind killing a bunch of bystanders to authenticate it, and why would they? Maybe a small plane instead. They probably had one of those to spare.

Or would the murderer come home alone, unsuccessful in his attempt to make her one of them? Or not even getting that far. Maybe he'd smashed her like a bag of chips in his drive to get some? Because her life was less important to him than his own pleasure…

The story would be so tragic—Bella lost in a horrible accident. Victim of a mugging gone wrong. Choking to death at dinner. A car accident, like my mom. So common. Happened all the time.

Would he bring her home? Bury her here for Charlie? Closed-casket ceremony, of course. My mom's coffin had been nailed shut....

I could only hope that he'd come back here, within my reach.

Maybe there would be no story at all. Maybe Charlie would call to ask my dad if he'd heard anything from Dr. Cullen, who just didn't show up to work one day. The house abandoned. No answer on any of the Cullens' phones. The mystery picked up by some second-rate news program, foul play suspected...

Maybe the big white house would burn to the ground, everyone trapped inside. Of course, they'd need bodies for that one. Eight humans of roughly the right size. Burned beyond recognition—beyond the help of dental records.

Either of those would be tricky—for me, that is. It would be hard to find them if they didn't want to be found. Of course, I had forever to look. If you had forever, you could check out every single piece of straw in the haystack, one by one, to see if it was the needle.

Right now, I wouldn't mind dismantling a haystack. At least that would be something to *do.* I hated knowing that I could be losing my chance. Giving the bloodsuckers the time to escape, if that was their plan.

We could go tonight. We could kill every one of them that we could find. I liked that plan because I knew Edward well enough to know that, if I killed any one of his coven, I would get my chance at him, too. He'd come for revenge. And I'd give it to him—I wouldn't let my brothers take him down as a pack. It would be just him and me. May the better man win.

But Sam wouldn't hear of it. *We're not going to break the treaty. Let them make the breach.* Just because we had no proof that the Cullens had done anything wrong. Yet. You had to add the yet, because we all knew it was inevitable. Bella was either coming back one of them, or not coming back. Either way, a human life had been lost. And that meant game on.

In the other room, Paul brayed like a mule. Maybe he'd switched to a comedy. Maybe the commercial was funny. Whatever. It grated on my nerves.

I thought about breaking his nose again. But it wasn't Paul I wanted to fight with. Not really.

I tried to listen to other sounds, the wind in the trees. It wasn't the same, not through human ears. There were a million voices in the wind that I couldn't hear in this body. But these ears were sensitive enough. I could hear past the trees, to the road, the sounds of the cars coming around that last bend where you could finally see the beach—the vista of the islands and the rocks and the big blue ocean stretching to the horizon. The La Push cops liked to hang out right around there. Tourists never noticed the reduced speed limit sign on the other side of the road.

I could hear the voices outside the souvenir shop on the beach. I could hear the cowbell clanging as the door opened and closed. I could hear Embry's mom at the cash register, printing out a receipt.

I could hear the tide raking across the beach rocks. I could hear the kids squeal as the icy water rushed in too fast for them to get out of the way. I could hear the moms complain about the wet clothes. And I could hear a familiar voice....

I was listening so hard that the sudden burst of Paul's donkey laugh made me jump half off the bed.

"Get out of my house," I grumbled. Knowing he wouldn't pay any attention, I followed my own advice. I wrenched open my window and climbed out the back way so that I wouldn't see Paul again. It would be too tempting. I knew I would hit him again, and Rachel was going to be pissed enough already. She'd see the blood on his shirt, and she'd blame me right away without waiting for proof. Of course, she'd be right, but still. I paced down to the shore, my fists in my pockets. Nobody looked at me twice when I went through the dirt lot by First Beach. That was one nice thing about summer—no one cared if you wore nothing but shorts.

I followed the familiar voice I'd heard and found Quil easy enough. He was on the south end of the crescent, avoiding the bigger part of the tourist crowd. He kept up a constant stream of warnings.

"Keep out of the water, Claire. C'mon. No, don't. Oh! *Nice*, kid. Seriously, do you want Emily to yell at me? I'm not bringing you back to the beach again if you don't—Oh yeah? Don't—ugh. You think that's funny, do you? Hah! Who's laughing now, huh?"

He had the giggling toddler by the ankle when I reached them. She had a bucket in one hand, and her jeans were drenched. He had a huge wet mark down the front of his tshirt.

"Five bucks on the baby girl," I said.

"Hey, Jake."

Claire squealed and threw her bucket at Quil's knees. "Down, down!"

He set her carefully on her feet and she ran to me. She wrapped her arms around my leg.

"Unca Jay!"

"How's it going, Claire?"

She giggled. "Qwil *aaaaawl* wet now."

"I can see that. Where's your mama?"

"Gone, gone, gone," Claire sang, "Cwaire pway wid Qwil *aaaawl* day. Cwaire nebber gowin home." She let go of me and ran to Quil. He scooped her up and slung her onto his shoulders.

"Sounds like somebody's hit the terrible twos."

"Threes actually," Quil corrected. "You missed the party. Princess theme. She made me wear a crown, and then Emily suggested they all try out her new play makeup on me."

"Wow, I'm *really* sorry I wasn't around to see that."

"Don't worry, Emily has pictures. Actually, I look pretty hot."

"You're such a patsy."

Quil shrugged. "Claire had a great time. That was the point."

I rolled my eyes. It was hard being around imprinted people. No matter what stage they were in—about to tie the knot like Sam or just a much-abused nanny like Quil—the peace and certainty they always radiated was downright puke-inducing. Claire squealed on his shoulders and pointed at the ground. "Pity wock, Qwil! For me, for me!"

"Which one, kiddo? The red one?"

"No wed!"

Quil dropped to his knees—Claire screamed and pulled his hair like a horse's reigns.

"This blue one?"

"No, no, no...," the little girl sang, thrilled with her new game. The weird part was, Quil was having just as much fun as she was. He didn't have that face on that so many of the tourist dads and moms were wearing—the when-is-naptime? face. You never saw a real parent so jazzed to play whatever stupid kiddie sport their rugrat could think up. I'd seen Quil play peekaboo for an hour straight without getting bored.

And I couldn't even make fun of him for it—I envied him too much. Though I did think it sucked that he had a good fourteen years of monkitude ahead of him until Claire was his age—for Quil, at least, it was a good thing werewolves didn't get older. But even all that time didn't seem to bother him much.

"Quil, you ever think about dating?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"No, no yewwo!" Claire crowed.

"You know. A real girl. I mean, just for now, right? On your nights off babysitting duty."

Quil stared at me, his mouth hanging open.

"Pity wock! Pity wock!" Claire screamed when he didn't offer her another choice. She smacked him on the head with her little fist.

"Sorry, Claire-bear. How about this pretty purple one?"

"No," she giggled. "No poopoh."

"Give me a clue. I'm begging, kid."

Claire thought it over. "Gween," she finally said.

Quil stared at the rocks, studying them. He picked four rocks in different shades of green, and offered them to her.

"Did I get it?"

"Yay!"

"Which one?"

"*Aaaaawl* ob dem!!"

She cupped her hands and he poured the small rocks into them. She laughed and immediately clunked him on the head with them. He winced theatrically and then got to his feet and started walking back up toward the parking lot. Probably worried about her getting cold in her wet clothes. He was worse than any paranoid, overprotective mother.

"Sorry if I was being pushy before, man, about the girl thing," I said.

"Naw, that's cool," Quil said. "It kind of took me by surprise is all. I hadn't thought about it."

"I bet she'd understand. You know, when she's grown up. She wouldn't get mad that you had a life while she was in diapers."

"No, I know. I'm sure she'd understand that."

He didn't say anything else.

"But you won't do that, will you?" I guessed.

"I can't see it," he said in a low voice. "I can't imagine. I just don't… see anyone that way. I don't notice girls anymore, you know. I don't see their faces."

"Put that together with the tiara and makeup, and maybe Claire will have a different kind of competition to worry about."

Quil laughed and made kissing noises at me. "You available this Friday, Jacob?"

"You wish," I said, and then I made a face. "Yeah, guess I am, though."

He hesitated a second and then said, "You ever think about dating?"

I sighed. Guess I'd opened myself up for that one.

"You know, Jake, maybe you should think about getting a life."

He didn't say it like a joke. His voice was sympathetic. That made it worse.

"I don't see them, either, Quil. I don't see their faces."

Quil sighed, too.

Far away, too low for anyone but just us two to hear it over the waves, a howl rose out of the forest.

"Dang, that's Sam," Quil said. His hands flew up to touch Claire, as if making sure she was still there. "I don't know where her mom's at!"

"I'll see what it is. If we need you, I'll let you know." I raced through the words. They came out all slurred together. "Hey, why don't you take her up to the Clearwaters'? Sue and Billy can keep an eye on her if they need to. They might know what's going on, anyway."

"Okay—get outta here, Jake!"

I took off running, not for the dirt path through the weedy hedge, but in the shortest line toward the forest. I hurdled the first line of driftwood and then ripped my way through the briars, still running. I felt the little tears as the thorns cut into my skin, but I ignored them. Their sting would be healed before I made the trees.

I cut behind the store and darted across the highway. Somebody honked at me. Once in the safety of the trees, I ran faster, taking longer strides. People would stare if I was out in the open. Normal people couldn't run like this. Sometimes I thought it might be fun to enter a race—you know, like the Olympic trials or something. It would be cool to watch the expressions on those star athletes' faces when I blew by them.

Only I was pretty sure the testing they did to make sure you weren't on steroids would probably turn up some really freaky crap in my blood.

As soon as I was in the true forest, unbound by roads or houses, I skidded to a stop and kicked my shorts off. With quick, practiced moves, I rolled them up and tied them to the leather cord around my ankle. As I was still pulling the ends tight, I started shifting. The fire trembled down my spine, throwing tight spasms out along my arms and legs. It only took a second. The heat flooded through me, and I felt the silent shimmer that made me something else. I threw my heavy paws against the matted earth and stretched my back in one long, rolling extension.

Phasing was very easy when I was centered like this. I didn't have issues with my temper anymore. Except when it got in the way.

For one half second, I remembered the awful moment at that unspeakable joke of a wedding. I'd been so insane with fury that I couldn't make my body work right. I'd been trapped, shaking and burning, unable to make the change and kill the monster just a few feet away from me. It had been so confusing. Dying to kill him. Afraid to hurt her. My friends in the way. And then, when I was finally able to take the form I wanted, the order from my leader. The edict from the Alpha. If it had been just Embry and Quil there that night without Sam… would I have been able to kill the murderer, then?

I hated it when Sam laid down the law like that. I hated the feeling of having no choice. Of having to obey.

And then I was conscious of an audience. I was not alone in my thoughts. *So self-absorbed all the time,* Leah thought.

*Yeah, no hypocrisy there, Leah,* I thought back.

*Can it, guys,* Sam told us.

We fell silent, and I felt Leah's wince at the word *guys*. Touchy, like always. Sam pretended not to notice. *Where's Quil and Jared?*

*Quil's got Claire. He's taking her to the Clearwaters'.*

*Good. Sue will take her.*

*Jared was going to Kim's,* Embry thought. *Good chance he didn't hear you.* There was a low grumble through the pack. I moaned along with them. When Jared finally showed up, no doubt he'd still be thinking about Kim. And nobody wanted a replay of what they were up to right now.

Sam sat back on his haunches and let another howl rip into the air. It was a signal and an order in one.

The pack was gathered a few miles east of where I was. I loped through the thick forest toward them. Leah, Embry, and Paul all were working in toward them, too. Leah was close—soon I could hear her footfalls not far into the woods. We continued in a parallel line, choosing not to run together.

*Well, we're not waiting all day for him. He'll just have to catch up later.*

*'Sup, boss?* Paul wanted to know.

*We need to talk. Something's happened.*

I felt Sam's thoughts flicker to me—and not just Sam's, but Seth's and Collin's and Brady's as well. Collin and Brady—the new kids—had been running patrol with Sam today, so they would know whatever he knew. I didn't know why Seth was already out here, and in the know. It wasn't his turn.

*Seth, tell them what you heard.*

I sped up, wanting to be there. I heard Leah move faster, too. She hated being outrun. Being the fastest was the only edge she claimed.

*Claim* this *, moron,* she hissed, and then she really kicked it into gear. I dug my nails into the loam and shot myself forward.

Sam didn't seem in the mood to put up with our usual crap. *Jake, Leah, give it a rest.* Neither of us slowed.

Sam growled, but let it go. *Seth?*

*Charlie called around till he found Billy at my house.*

*Yeah, I talked to him,* Paul added.

I felt a jolt go through me as Seth thought Charlie's name. This was it. The waiting was over. I ran faster, forcing myself to breathe, though my lungs felt kinda stiff all of a sudden.

Which story would it be?

*So he's all flipped out. Guess Edward and Bella got home last week, and…*

My chest eased up.

She was alive. Or she wasn't *dead* dead, at least.

I hadn't realized how much difference it would make to me. I'd been thinking of her as dead this whole time, and I only saw that now. I saw that I'd never believed that he would bring her back alive. It shouldn't matter, because I knew what was coming next. *Yeah, bro, and here's the bad news. Charlie talked to her, said she sounded bad. She told him she's sick. Carlisle got on and told Charlie that Bella picked up some rare disease in South America. Said she's quarantined. Charlie's going crazy, 'cause even he's not allowed to see her. He says he doesn't care if he gets sick, but Carlisle wouldn't bend. No visitors. Told Charlie it was pretty serious, but that he's doing everything he can. Charlie's been stewing about it for days, but he only called Billy now. He said she sounded worse today.*

The mental silence when Seth finished was profound. We all understood. So she would die of this disease, as far as Charlie knew. Would they let him view the corpse? The pale, perfectly still, unbreathing white body? They couldn't let him touch the cold skin—he might notice how hard it was. They'd have to wait until she could hold still, could keep from killing Charlie and the other mourners. How long would that take?

Would they bury her? Would she dig herself out, or would the bloodsuckers come for her?

The others listened to my speculating in silence. I'd put a lot more thought into this than any of them.

Leah and I entered the clearing at nearly the same time. She was sure her nose led the way, though. She dropped onto her haunches beside her brother while I trotted forward to stand at Sam's right hand. Paul

circled and made room for me in my place. *Beatcha again,* Leah thought, but I barely heard her.

I wondered why I was the only one on my feet. My fur stood up on my shoulders, bristling with impatience.

*Well, what are we waiting for?* I asked.

No one said anything, but I heard their feelings of hesitation. *Oh, come on! The treaty's broken!*

*We have no proof—maybe she* is *sick….*

*OH, PLEASE!*

*Okay, so the circumstantial evidence is pretty strong. Still… Jacob.* Sam's thought came slow, hesitant. *Are you sure this is what you want? Is it really the right thing? We all know what she wanted.*

*The treaty doesn't mention anything about victim preferences, Sam!*

*Is she really a victim? Would you label her that way?*

*Yes!*

*Jake,* Seth thought, *they aren't our enemies.*

*Shut up, kid! Just 'cause you've got some kind of sick hero worship thing going on with that bloodsucker, it doesn't change the law. They are our enemies. They are in our territory. We take them out. I don't care if you had fun fighting alongside Edward Cullen once upon a time.*

*So what are you going to do when Bella fights with them, Jacob? Huh?* Seth demanded. *She's not Bella anymore.*

*You gonna be the one to take her down?*

I couldn't stop myself from wincing.

*No, you're not. So, what? You gonna make one of us do it? And then hold a grudge against whoever it is forever?*

*I wouldn't….*

*Sure you won't. You're not ready for this fight, Jacob.*

Instinct took over and I crouched forward, snarling at the gangly sand-colored wolf across the circle.

*Jacob!* Sam cautioned. *Seth, shut up for a second.*

Seth nodded his big head.

*Dang, what'd I miss?* Quil thought. He was running for the gathering place full-out. *Heard about Charlie's call….*

*We're getting ready to go,* I told him. *Why don't you swing by Kim's and drag Jared out with your teeth? We're going to need everyone.*

*Come straight here, Quil,* Sam ordered. *We've decided nothing yet.* I growled.

*Jacob, I have to think about what's best for this pack. I have to choose the course that protects you all best. Times have changed since our ancestors made that treaty. I… well, I don't honestly believe that the Cullens are a danger to us. And we know that they will not be here much longer. Surely once they've told their story, they will disappear. Our lives can return to normal.*

*Normal?*

*If we challenge them, Jacob, they will defend themselves well. Are you afraid?*

*Are you so ready to lose a brother?* He paused. *Or a sister?* he tacked on as an afterthought.

*I'm not afraid to die.*

*I know that, Jacob. It's one reason I question your judgment on this.* I stared into his black eyes. *Do you intend to honor our fathers' treaty or not?*

*I honor my pack. I do what's best for them.*

*Coward.*

His muzzle tensed, pulling back over his teeth.

*Enough, Jacob. You're overruled.* Sam's mental voice changed, took on that strange double timbre that we could not disobey. The voice of the Alpha. He met the gaze of every wolf in the circle.

*The pack is not attacking the Cullens without provocation. The spirit of the treaty remains. They are not a danger to our people, nor are they a danger to the people of Forks. Bella Swan made an informed choice, and we are not going to punish our former allies for her choice.*

*Hear, hear,* Seth thought enthusiastically.

*I thought I told you to shut it, Seth.*

*Oops. Sorry, Sam.*

*Jacob, where do you think you're going?*

I left the circle, moving toward the west so that I could turn my back on him. *I'm going to tell my father goodbye. Apparently there was no purpose in me sticking around this long.*

*Aw, Jake—don't do that again!*

*Shut up, Seth,* several voices thought together.

*We don't want you to leave,* Sam told me, his thought softer than before. *So force me to stay, Sam. Take away my will. Make me a slave. You know I won't do that.*

*Then there's nothing more to say.*

I ran away from them, trying very hard not to think about what was next. Instead, I concentrated on my memories of the long wolf months, of letting the humanity bleed out of me until I was more animal than man. Living in the moment, eating when hungry, sleeping when tired, drinking when thirsty, and running—running just to run. Simple desires, simple answers to those desires. Pain came in easily managed forms. The pain of hunger. The pain of cold ice under your paws. The pain of cutting claws when dinner got feisty. Each pain had a simple answer, a clear action to end that pain. Not like being human.

Yet, as soon as I was in jogging distance of my house, I shifted back into my human body. I needed to be able to think in privacy.

I untied my shorts and yanked them on, already running for the house. I'd done it. I'd hidden what I was thinking and now it was too late for Sam to stop me. He couldn't hear me now.

Sam had made a very clear ruling. The pack would not attack the Cullens. Okay. He hadn't mentioned an individual acting alone.

Nope, the pack wasn't attacking anyone today.

But I was.

# Chapter 9

## SURE AS HELL DIDN'T SEE THAT ONE COMING

I didn't really plan to say goodbye to my father.

After all, one quick call to Sam and the game would be up. They'd cut me off and push me back. Probably try to make me angry, or even hurt me—somehow force me to phase so that Sam could lay down a new law.

But Billy was expecting me, knowing I'd be in some kind of state. He was in the yard, just sitting there in his wheelchair with his eyes right on the spot where I came through the trees. I saw him judge my direction—headed straight past the house to my homemade garage.

"Got a minute, Jake?"

I skidded to a stop. I looked at him and then toward the garage.

"C'mon kid. At least help me inside."

I gritted my teeth but decided that he'd be more likely to cause trouble with Sam if I didn't lie to him for a few minutes.

"Since when do you need help, old man?"

He laughed his rumbling laugh. "My arms are tired. I pushed myself all the way here from Sue's."

"It's downhill. You coasted the whole way."

I rolled his chair up the little ramp I'd made for him and into the living room.

"Caught me. Think I got up to about thirty miles per hour. It was great."

"You're gonna wreck that chair, you know. And then you'll be dragging yourself around by your elbows."

"Not a chance. It'll be your job to carry me."

"You won't be going many places."

Billy put his hands on the wheels and steered himself to the fridge. "Any food left?"

"You got me. Paul was here all day, though, so probably not."

Billy sighed. "Have to start hiding the groceries if we're gonna avoid starvation."

"Tell Rachel to go stay at his place."

Billy's joking tone vanished, and his eyes got soft. "We've only had her home a few weeks. First time she's been here in a long time. It's hard—the girls were older than you when your mom passed. They have more trouble being in this house."

"I know."

Rebecca hadn't been home once since she got married, though she did have a good excuse. Plane tickets from Hawaii were pretty pricey. Washington State was close enough that Rachel didn't have the same defense. She'd taken classes straight through the summer semesters, working double shifts over the

holidays at some café on campus. If it hadn't been for Paul, she probably would have taken off again real quick. Maybe that was why Billy wouldn't kick him out.

"Well, I'm going to go work on some stuff. . . ." I started for the back door.

"Wait up, Jake. Aren't you going to tell me what happened? Do I have to call Sam for an update?"

I stood with my back to him, hiding my face.

"Nothing happened. Sam's giving them a bye. Guess we're all just a bunch of leech lovers now."

"Jake . . ."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Are you leaving, son?"

The room was quiet for a long time while I decided how to say it.

"Rachel can have her room back. I know she hates that air mattress."

"She'd rather sleep on the floor than lose you. So would I."

I snorted.

"Jacob, please. If you need… a break. Well, take it. But not so long again. Come back."

"Maybe. Maybe my gig will be weddings. Make a cameo at Sam's, then Rachel's. Jared and Kim might

come first, though. Probably ought to have a suit or something."

"Jake, look at me."

I turned around slowly. "What?"

He stared into my eyes for a long minute. "Where are you going?"

"I don't really have a specific place in mind."

He cocked his head to the side, and his eyes narrowed. "Don't you?"

We stared each other down. The seconds ticked by.

"Jacob," he said. His voice was strained. "Jacob, don't. It's not worth it."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Leave Bella and the Cullens be. Sam is right."

I stared at him for a second, and then I crossed the room in two long strides. I grabbed the phone and disconnected the cable from the box and the jack. I wadded the gray cord up in the palm of my hand.

"Bye, Dad."

"Jake, wait—," he called after me, but I was out the door, running. The motorcycle wasn't as fast as running, but it was more discreet. I wondered how long it would take Billy to wheel himself down to the store and then get someone on the phone who could get a message to Sam. I'd bet Sam was still in his wolf form. The problem would be if Paul came back to our

place anytime soon. He could phase in a second and let Sam know what I was doing....

I wasn't going to worry about it. I would go as fast as I could, and if they caught me, I'd deal with that when I had to.

I kicked the bike to life and then I was racing down the muddy lane. I didn't look behind me as I passed the house.

The highway was busy with tourist traffic; I wove in and out of the cars, earning a bunch of honks and a few fingers. I took the turn onto the 101 at seventy, not bothering to look. I had to ride the line for a minute to avoid getting smeared by a minivan. Not that it would have killed me, but it would have slowed me down. Broken bones—the big ones, at least—took days to heal completely, as I had good cause to know. The freeway cleared up a little, and I pushed the bike to eighty. I didn't touch the brake until I was close to the narrow drive; I figured I was in the clear then. Sam wouldn't come this far to stop me. It was too late.

It wasn't until that moment—when I was sure that I'd made it—that I started to think about what exactly I was going to do now. I slowed down to twenty, taking the twists through the trees more carefully than I needed to.

I knew they would hear me coming, bike or no bike, so surprise was out. There was no way to disguise my intentions. Edward would hear my plan as soon as I was close enough. Maybe he already could. But I

thought this would still work out, because I had his ego on my side. He'd want to fight me alone.

So I'd just walk in, see Sam's precious evidence for myself, and then challenge Edward to a duel.

I snorted. The parasite'd probably get a kick out of the theatrics of it. When I finished with him, I'd take as many of the rest of them as I could before they got me. Huh—I wondered if Sam would consider my death provocation. Probably say I got what I deserved. Wouldn't want to offend his bloodsucker BFFs. The drive opened up into the meadow, and the smell hit me like a rotten tomato to the face. Ugh. Reeking vampires. My stomach started churning. The stench would be hard to take this way—undiluted by the scent of humans as it had been the other time I'd come here—though not as bad as smelling it through my wolf nose. I wasn't sure what to expect, but there was no sign of life around the big white crypt. Of course they knew I was here.

I cut the engine and listened to the quiet. Now I could hear tense, angry murmurs from just the other side of the wide double doors. Someone was home. I heard my name and I smiled, happy to think I was causing them a little stress.

I took one big gulp of air—it would only be worse inside—and leaped up the porch stairs in one bound.

The door opened before my fist touched it, and the doctor stood in the frame, his eyes grave.

"Hello, Jacob," he said, calmer than I would have expected. "How are you?"

I took a deep breath through my mouth. The reek pouring through the door was overpowering.

I was disappointed that it was Carlisle who answered. I'd rather Edward had come through the door, fangs out. Carlisle was so… just human or something. Maybe it was the house calls he made last spring when I got busted up. But it made me uncomfortable to look into his face and know that I was planning to kill him if I could.

"I heard Bella made it back alive," I said.

"Er, Jacob, it's not really the best time." The doctor seemed uncomfortable, too, but not in the way I expected. "Could we do this later?"

I stared at him, dumbfounded. Was he asking to postpone the death match for a more convenient time?

And then I heard Bella's voice, cracked and rough, and I couldn't think about anything else.

"Why not?" she asked someone. "Are we keeping secrets from Jacob, too? What's the point?"

Her voice was not what I was expecting. I tried to remember the voices of the young vampires we'd fought in the spring, but all I'd registered was snarling. Maybe those newborns hadn't had the piercing, ringing sound of the older ones, either. Maybe all new vampires sounded hoarse.

"Come in, please, Jacob," Bella croaked more loudly.

Carlisle's eyes tightened.

I wondered if Bella was thirsty. My eyes narrowed, too.

“Excuse me,” I said to the doctor as I stepped around him. It was hard—it went against all my instincts to turn my back to one of them. Not impossible, though. If there was such a thing as a safe vampire, it was the strangely gentle leader. I would stay away from Carlisle when the fight started. There were enough of them to kill without including him.

I sidestepped into the house, keeping my back to the wall. My eyes swept the room—it was unfamiliar. The last time I’d been in here it had been all done up for a party. Everything was bright and pale now. Including the six vampires standing in a group by the white sofa.

They were all here, all together, but that was not what froze me where I stood and had my jaw dropping to the floor.

It was Edward. It was the expression on his face.

I’d seen him angry, and I’d seen him arrogant, and once I’d seen him in pain. But this—

this was beyond agony. His eyes were half-crazed. He didn’t look up to glare at me. He stared down at the couch beside him with an expression like someone had lit him on fire. His hands were rigid claws at his side.

I couldn’t even enjoy his anguish. I could only think of one thing that would make him look like that, and my eyes followed his.

I saw her at the same moment that I caught her scent.

Her warm, clean, human scent.

Bella was half-hidden behind the arm of the sofa, curled up in a loose fetal position, her arms wrapped around her knees. For a long second I could see nothing except that she was still the Bella that I loved, her skin still a soft, pale peach, her eyes still the same chocolate brown. My heart thudded a strange, broken meter, and I wondered if this was just some lying dream that I was about to wake up from.

Then I really saw her.

There were deep circles under her eyes, dark circles that jumped out because her face was all haggard. Was she thinner? Her skin seemed tight—like her cheekbones might break right through it. Most of her dark hair was pulled away from her face into a messy knot, but a few strands stuck limply to her forehead and neck, to the sheen of sweat that covered her skin. There was something about her fingers and wrists that looked so fragile it was scary.

She was sick. Very sick.

Not a lie. The story Charlie'd told Billy was not a story. While I stared, eyes bugging, her skin turned light green.

The blond bloodsucker—the showy one, Rosalie—bent over her, cutting into my view, hovering in a strange, protective way.

This was wrong. I knew how Bella felt about almost everything—her thoughts were so obvious; sometimes it was like they were printed on her forehead. So she didn't have to tell me every detail of a situation for me to get it. I knew that Bella didn't like Rosalie. I'd seen it in the set of her lips when she talked about her. Not just that she didn't like her. She was afraid of Rosalie. Or she had been.

There was no fear as Bella glanced up at her now. Her expression was… apologetic or something. Then Rosalie snatched a basin from the floor and held it under Bella's chin just in time for Bella to throw up noisily into it.

Edward fell to his knees by Bella's side—his eyes all tortured-looking—and Rosalie held out her hand, warning him to keep back.

None of it made sense.

When she could raise her head, Bella smiled weakly at me, sort of embarrassed. "Sorry about that," she whispered to me.

Edward moaned real quiet. His head slumped against Bella's knees. She put one of her hands against his cheek. Like she was comforting him.

I didn't realize my legs had carried me forward until Rosalie hissed at me, suddenly appearing between me and the couch. She was like a person on a TV screen. I didn't care she was there. She didn't seem real.

"Rose, don't," Bella whispered. "It's fine."

Blondie moved out of my way, though I could tell she hated to do it. Scowling at me, she crouched by Bella's head, tensed to spring. She was easier to ignore than I ever would have dreamed.

"Bella, what's wrong?" I whispered. Without thinking about it, I found myself on my knees, too, leaning over the back of the couch across from her… husband. He didn't seem to notice me, and I barely glanced at him. I reached out for her free hand, taking it in both of mine. Her skin was icy. "Are you all right?"

It was a stupid question. She didn't answer it.

"I'm so glad you came to see me today, Jacob," she said.

Even though I knew Edward couldn't hear her thoughts, he seemed to hear some meaning I didn't. He moaned again, into the blanket that covered her, and she stroked his cheek.

"What is it, Bella?" I insisted, wrapping my hands tight around her cold, fragile fingers. Instead of answering, she glanced around the room like she was searching for something, both a plea and a warning in her look. Six pairs of anxious yellow eyes stared back at her. Finally, she turned to Rosalie.

"Help me up, Rose?" she asked.

Rosalie's lips pulled back over her teeth, and she glared up at me like she wanted to rip my throat out. I was sure that was exactly the case.

"Please, Rose."

The blonde made a face, but leaned over her again, next to Edward, who didn't move an inch. She put her arm carefully behind Bella's shoulders.

"No," I whispered. "Don't get up. . . ." She looked so weak.

"I'm answering your question," she snapped, sounding a little bit more like the way she usually talked to me.

Rosalie pulled Bella off the couch. Edward stayed where he was, sagging forward till his face was buried in the cushions. The blanket fell to the ground at Bella's feet. Bella's body was swollen, her torso ballooning out in a strange, sick way. It strained against the faded gray sweatshirt that was way too big for her shoulders and arms. The rest of her seemed thinner, like the big bulge had grown out of what it had sucked from her. It took me a second to realize what the deformed part was—I didn't understand until she folded her hands tenderly around her bloated stomach, one above and one below. Like she was cradling it.

I saw it then, but I still couldn't believe it. I'd seen her just a month ago. There was no way she could be pregnant. Not that pregnant.

Except that she was.

I didn't want to see this, didn't want to think about this. I didn't want to imagine him inside her. I didn't want to know that something I hated so much had taken root in the body I loved. My stomach heaved, and I had to swallow back vomit. But it was worse

than that, so much worse. Her distorted body, the bones jabbing against the skin of her face. I could only guess that she looked like this—so pregnant, so sick—because whatever was inside her was taking her life to feed its own….

Because it was a monster. Just like its father.

I always knew he would kill her.

His head snapped up as he heard the words inside mine. One second we were both on our knees, and then he was on his feet, towering over me. His eyes were flat black, the circles under them dark purple.

"Outside, Jacob," he snarled.

I was on my feet, too. Looking down on him now. This was why I was here.

"Let's do this," I agreed.

The big one, Emmett, pushed forward on Edward's other side, with the hungry-looking one, Jasper, right behind him. I really didn't care. Maybe my pack would clean up the scraps when they finished me off. Maybe not. It didn't matter.

For the tiniest part of a second my eyes touched on the two standing in the back. Esme. Alice. Small and distractingly feminine. Well, I was sure the others would kill me before I had to do anything about them. I didn't want to kill girls… even vampire girls. Though I might make an exception for that blonde.

"No," Bella gasped, and she stumbled forward, out of balance, to clutch at Edward's arm. Rosalie moved

with her, like there was a chain locking them to each other.

“I just need to talk to him, Bella,” Edward said in a low voice, talking only to her. He reached up to touch her face, to stroke it. This made the room turn red, made me see fire

—that, after all he’d done to her, he was still allowed to touch her that way. “Don’t strain yourself,” he went on, pleading. “Please rest. We’ll both be back in just a few minutes.”

She stared at his face, reading it carefully. Then she nodded and drooped toward the couch. Rosalie helped lower her back onto the cushions. Bella stared at me, trying to hold my eyes.

“Behave,” she insisted. “And then come back.”

I didn’t answer. I wasn’t making any promises today. I looked away and then followed Edward out the front door.

A random, disjointed voice in my head noted that separating him from the coven hadn’t been so difficult, had it?

He kept walking, never checking to see if I was about to spring at his unprotected back. I supposed he didn’t need to check. He would know when I decided to attack. Which meant I’d have to make that decision very quickly.

“I’m not ready for you to kill me yet, Jacob Black,” he whispered as he paced quickly away from the house. “You’ll have to have a little patience.”

Like I cared about his schedule. I growled under my breath. "Patience isn't my specialty."

He kept walking, maybe a couple hundred yards down the drive away from the house, with me right on his heels. I was all hot, my fingers trembling. On the edge, ready and waiting.

He stopped without warning and pivoted to face me. His expression froze me again. For a second I was just a kid—a kid who had lived all of his life in the same tiny town. Just a child. Because I knew I would have to live a lot more, suffer a lot more, to ever understand the searing agony in Edward's eyes.

He raised a hand as if to wipe sweat from his forehead, but his fingers scraped against his face like they were going to rip his granite skin right off. His black eyes burned in their sockets, out of focus, or seeing things that weren't there. His mouth opened like he was going to scream, but nothing came out.

This was the face a man would have if he were burning at the stake. For a moment I couldn't speak. It was too real, this face—I'd seen a shadow of it in the house, seen it in her eyes and his, but this made it final. The last nail in her coffin.

"It's killing her, right? She's dying." And I knew when I said it that my face was a watered-down echo of his. Weaker, different, because I was still in shock. I hadn't wrapped my head around it yet—it was happening too fast. He'd had time to get to this point. And it was different because I'd already lost her so many times, so many ways, in my head. And different

because she was never really mine to lose. And different because this wasn't my fault.

"My fault," Edward whispered, and his knees gave out. He crumpled in front of me, vulnerable, the easiest target you could imagine.

But I felt cold as snow—there was no fire in me.

"Yes," he groaned into the dirt, like he was confessing to the ground. "Yes, it's killing her."

His broken helplessness irritated me. I wanted a fight, not an execution. Where was his smug superiority now?

"So why hasn't Carlisle done anything?" I growled. "He's a doctor, right? Get it out of her."

He looked up then and answered me in a tired voice. Like he was explaining this to a kindergartener for the tenth time. "She won't let us."

It took a minute for the words to sink in. Jeez, she was running true to form. Of course, die for the monster spawn. It was so Bella.

"You know her well," he whispered. "How quickly you see.... I didn't see. Not in time. She wouldn't talk to me on the way home, not really. I thought she was frightened—that would be natural. I thought she was angry with me for putting her through this, for endangering her life. Again. I never imagined what she was really thinking, what she was resolving. Not until my family met us at the airport and she ran right into Rosalie's arms. Rosalie's! And then I heard what Rosalie was thinking. I didn't understand until I

heard that. Yet you understand after one second. . . ." He half-sighed, half-groaned.

"Just back up a second. She won't let you." The sarcasm was acid on my tongue. "Did you ever notice that she's exactly as strong as a normal hundred-and-ten-pound human girl? How stupid are you vamps? Hold her down and knock her out with drugs."

"I wanted to," he whispered. "Carlisle would have. . . ."

What, too noble were they?

"No. Not noble. Her bodyguard complicated things."

Oh. His story hadn't made much sense before, but it fit together now. So that's what Blondie was up to. What was in it for her, though? Did the beauty queen want Bella to die so bad?

"Maybe," he said. "Rosalie doesn't look at it quite that way."

"So take the blonde out first. Your kind can be put back together, right? Turn her into a jigsaw and take care of Bella."

"Emmett and Esme are backing her up. Emmett would never let us… and Carlisle won't help me with Esme against it. . . ." He trailed off, his voice disappearing.

"You should have left Bella with me."

"Yes."

It was a bit late for that, though. Maybe he should have thought about all this before he knocked her up with the life-sucking monster.

He stared up at me from inside his own personal hell, and I could see that he agreed with me.

“We didn’t know,” he said, the words as quiet as a breath. “I never dreamed. There’s never been anything like Bella and I before. How could we know that a human was able conceive a child with one of us—”

“When the human should get ripped to shreds in the process?”

“Yes,” he agreed in a tense whisper. “They’re out there, the sadistic ones, the incubus, the succubus. They exist. But the seduction is merely a prelude to the feast. No one survives.” He shook his head like the idea revolted him. Like he was any different.

“I didn’t realize they had a special name for what you are,” I spit. He stared up at me with a face that looked a thousand years old.

“Even you, Jacob Black, cannot hate me as much as I hate myself.”

Wrong, I thought, too enraged to speak.

“Killing me now doesn’t save her,” he said quietly.

“So what does?”

“Jacob, you have to do something for me.”

“The hell I do, parasite!”

He kept staring at me with those half-tired, half-crazy eyes. “For her?”

I clenched my teeth together hard. “I did everything I could to keep her away from you. Every single thing. It’s too late.”

“You know her, Jacob. You connect to her on a level that I don’t even understand. You are part of her, and she is part of you. She won’t listen to me, because she thinks I’m underestimating her. She thinks she’s strong enough for this. . . .” He choked and then swallowed. “She might listen to you.”

“Why would she?”

He lurched to his feet, his eyes burning brighter than before, wilder. I wondered if he was really going crazy. Could vampires lose their minds?

“Maybe,” he answered my thought. “I don’t know. It feels like it.” He shook his head. “I have to try to hide this in front of her, because stress makes her more ill. She can’t keep anything down as it is. I have to be composed; I can’t make it harder. But that doesn’t matter now. She has to listen to you!”

“I can’t tell her anything you haven’t. What do you want me to do? Tell her she’s stupid? She probably already knows that. Tell her she’s going to die? I bet she knows that, too.”

“You can offer her what she wants.”

He wasn’t making any sense. Part of the crazy?

"I don't care about anything but keeping her alive," he said, suddenly focused now. "If it's a child she wants, she can have it. She can have half a dozen babies. Anything she wants." He paused for one beat. "She can have puppies, if that's what it takes."

He met my stare for a moment and his face was frenzied under the thin layer of control. My hard scowl crumbled as I processed his words, and I felt my mouth pop open in shock.

"But not this way!" he hissed before I could recover. "Not this thing that's sucking the life from her while I stand there helpless! Watching her sicken and waste away. Seeing it hurting her." He sucked in a fast breath like someone had punched him in the gut.

"You have to make her see reason, Jacob. She won't listen to me anymore. Rosalie's always there, feeding her insanity—encouraging her. Protecting her. No, protecting it. Bella's life means nothing to her."

The noise coming from my throat sounded like I was choking.

What was he saying? That Bella should, what? Have a baby? With me? What? How?

Was he giving her up? Or did he think she wouldn't mind being shared?

"Whichever. Whatever keeps her alive."

"That's the craziest thing you've said yet," I mumbled.

"She loves you."

"Not enough."

"She's ready to die to have a child. Maybe she'd accept something less extreme."

"Don't you know her at all?"

"I know, I know. It's going to take a lot of convincing. That's why I need you. You know how she thinks. Make her see sense."

I couldn't think about what he was suggesting. It was too much. Impossible. Wrong. Sick. Borrowing Bella for the weekends and then returning her Monday morning like a rental movie? So messed up.

So tempting.

I didn't want to consider, didn't want to imagine, but the images came anyway. I'd fantasized about Bella that way too many times, back when there was still a possibility of us, and then long after it was clear that the fantasies would only leave festering sores because there was no possibility, none at all. I hadn't been able to help myself then. I couldn't stop myself now. Bella in my arms, Bella sighing my name…

Worse still, this new image I'd never had before, one that by all rights shouldn't have existed for me. Not yet. An image I knew I wouldn't've suffered over for years if he hadn't shoved it in my head now. But it stuck there, winding threads through my brain like a weed—poisonous and unkillable. Bella, healthy and glowing, so different than now, but something the same: her body, not distorted, changed in a more natural way. Round with my child.

I tried to escape the venomous weed in my mind. "Make Bella see sense? What universe do you live in?"

"At least try."

I shook my head fast. He waited, ignoring the negative answer because he could hear the conflict in my thoughts.

"Where is this psycho crap coming from? Are you making this up as you go?"

"I've been thinking of nothing but ways to save her since I realized what she was planning to do. What she would die to do. But I didn't know how to contact you. I knew you wouldn't listen if I called. I would have come to find you soon, if you hadn't come today. But it's hard to leave her, even for a few minutes. Her condition… it changes so fast. The thing is… growing. Swiftly. I can't be away from her now."

"What is it?"

"None of us have any idea. But it is stronger than she is. Already."

I could suddenly see it then—see the swelling monster in my head, breaking her from the inside out.

"Help me stop it," he whispered. "Help me stop this from happening."

"How? By offering my stud services?" He didn't even flinch when I said that, but I did.

"You're really sick. She'll never listen to this."

"Try. There's nothing to lose now. How will it hurt?"

It would hurt me. Hadn't I taken enough rejection from Bella without this?

"A little pain to save her? Is it such a high cost?"

"But it won't work."

"Maybe not. Maybe it will confuse her, though. Maybe she'll falter in her resolve. One moment of doubt is all I need."

"And then you pull the rug out from under the offer? 'Just kidding, Bella'?"

"If she wants a child, that's what she gets. I won't rescind."

I couldn't believe I was even thinking about this. Bella would punch me—not that I cared about that, but it would probably break her hand again. I shouldn't let him talk to me, mess with my head. I should just kill him now.

"Not now," he whispered. "Not yet. Right or wrong, it would destroy her, and you know it. No need to be hasty. If she won't listen to you, you'll get your chance. The moment Bella's heart stops beating, I will be begging for you to kill me."

"You won't have to beg long."

The hint of a worn smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "I'm very much counting on that."

"Then we have a deal."

He nodded and held out his cold stone hand.

Swallowing my disgust, I reached out to take his hand. My fingers closed around the rock, and I shook it once.

“We have a deal,” he agreed.

# Chapter 10

## WHY DIDN'T I JUST WALK AWAY? OH RIGHT, BECAUSE I'M AN IDIOT.

I felt like—like I don't know what. Like this wasn't real. Like I was in some Goth version of a bad sitcom. Instead of being the A/V dweeb about to ask the head cheerleader to the prom, I was the finished-second-place werewolf about to ask the vampire's wife to shack up and procreate. Nice.

No, I wouldn't do it. It was twisted and wrong. I was going to forget all about what he'd said.

But I would talk to her. I'd try to make her listen to me.

And she wouldn't. Just like always.

Edward didn't answer or comment on my thoughts as he led the way back to the house. I wondered about the place that he'd chosen to stop. Was it far enough from the house that the others couldn't hear his whispers? Was that the point?

Maybe. When we walked through the door, the other Cullens' eyes were suspicious and confused. No one looked disgusted or outraged. So they must not have heard either favor Edward had asked me for.

I hesitated in the open doorway, not sure what to do now. It was better right there, with a little bit of breathable air blowing in from outside.

Edward walked into the middle of the huddle, shoulders stiff. Bella watched him anxiously, and then her eyes flickered to me for a second. Then she was watching him again.

Her face turned a grayish pale, and I could see what he meant about the stress making her feel worse.

"We're going to let Jacob and Bella speak privately," Edward said. There was no inflection at all in his voice. Robotic.

"Over my pile of ashes," Rosalie hissed at him. She was still hovering by Bella's head, one of her cold hands placed possessively on Bella's sallow cheek. Edward didn't look at her. "Bella," he said in that same empty tone. "Jacob wants to talk to you. Are you afraid to be alone with him?"

Bella looked at me, confused. Then she looked at Rosalie.

"Rose, it's fine. Jake's not going to hurt us. Go with Edward."

"It might be a trick," the blonde warned.

"I don't see how," Bella said.

"Carlisle and I will always be in your sight, Rosalie," Edward said. The emotionless voice was cracking, showing the anger through it. "We're the ones she's afraid of."

"No," Bella whispered. Her eyes were glistening, her lashes wet. "No, Edward. I'm not..."

He shook his head, smiling a little. The smile was painful to look at. “I didn’t mean it that way, Bella. I’m fine. Don’t worry about me.”

Sickening. He was right—she was beating herself up about hurting his feelings. The girl was a classic martyr. She’d totally been born in the wrong century. She should have lived back when she could have gotten herself fed to some lions for a good cause.

“Everyone,” Edward said, his hand stiffly motioning toward the door. “Please.”

The composure he was trying to keep up for Bella was shaky. I could see how close he was to that burning man he’d been outside. The others saw it, too. Silently, they moved out the door while I shifted out of the way. They moved fast; my heart beat twice, and the room was cleared except for Rosalie, hesitating in the middle of the floor, and Edward, still waiting by the door.

“Rose,” Bella said quietly. “I want you to go.”

The blonde glared at Edward and then gestured for him to go first. He disappeared out the door. She gave me a long warning glower, and then she disappeared, too. Once we were alone, I crossed the room and sat on the floor next to Bella. I took both her cold hands in mine, rubbing them carefully.

“Thanks, Jake. That feels good.”

“I’m not going to lie, Bells. You’re hideous.”

“I know,” she sighed. “I’m scary-looking.”

"Thing-from-the-swamp scary," I agreed.

She laughed. "It's so good having you here. It feels nice to smile. I don't know how much more drama I can stand."

I rolled my eyes.

"Okay, okay," she agreed. "I bring it on myself."

"Yeah, you do. What're you thinking, Bells? Seriously!"

"Did he ask you to yell at me?"

"Sort of. Though I can't figure why he thinks you'd listen to me. You never have before."

She sighed.

"I told you—," I started to say.

"Did you know that 'I told you so' has a brother, Jacob?" she asked, cutting me off. "His name is ' Shut the hell up. '"

"Good one."

She grinned at me. Her skin stretched tight over the bones. "I can't take credit—I got it off a rerun of The Simpsons. "

"Missed that one."

"It was funny."

We didn't talk for a minute. Her hands were starting to warm up a little.

"Did he really ask you to talk to me?"

I nodded. "To talk some sense into you. There's a battle that's lost before it starts."

"So why did you agree?"

I didn't answer. I wasn't sure I knew.

I did know this—every second I spent with her was only going to add to the pain I would have to suffer later. Like a junkie with a limited supply, the day of reckoning was coming for me. The more hits I took now, the harder it would be when my supply ran out.

"It'll work out, you know," she said after a quiet minute. "I believe that."

That made me see red again. "Is dementia one of your symptoms?" I snapped. She laughed, though my anger was so real that my hands were shaking around hers.

"Maybe," she said. "I'm not saying things will work out easily, Jake. But how could I have lived through all that I've lived through and not believe in magic by this point?"

"Magic?"

"Especially for you," she said. She was smiling. She pulled one of her hands away from mine and pressed it against my cheek. Warmer than before, but it felt cool against my skin, like most things did. "More than anyone else, you've got some magic waiting to make things right for you."

"What are you babbling about?"

Still smiling. "Edward told me once what it was like—your imprinting thing. He said it was like A Midsummer Night's Dream, like magic. You'll find who you're really looking for, Jacob, and maybe then all of this will make sense."

If she hadn't looked so fragile I would've been screaming.

As it was, I did growl at her.

"If you think that imprinting could ever make sense of this insanity . . ." I struggled for words. "Do you really think that just because I might someday imprint on some stranger it would make this right?" I jabbed a finger toward her swollen body. "Tell me what the point was then, Bella! What was the point of me loving you? What was the point of you loving him? When you die"—the words were a snarl—"how is that ever right again?

What's the point to all the pain? Mine, yours, his! You'll kill him, too, not that I care about that." She flinched, but I kept going. "So what was the point of your twisted love story, in the end? If there is any sense, please show me, Bella, because I don't see it."

She sighed. "I don't know yet, Jake. But I just… feel… that this is all going somewhere good, hard to see as it is now. I guess you could call it faith."

"You're dying for nothing, Bella! Nothing!"

Her hand dropped from my face to her bloated stomach, caressed it. She didn't have to say the

words for me to know what she was thinking. She was dying for it.

“I’m not going to die,” she said through her teeth, and I could tell she was repeating things she’d said before. “I will keep my heart beating. I’m strong enough for that.”

“That’s a load of crap, Bella. You’ve been trying to keep up with the supernatural for too long. No normal person can do it. You’re not strong enough.” I took her face in my hand. I didn’t have to remind myself to be gentle. Everything about her screamed breakable.

“I can do this. I can do this,” she muttered, sounding a lot like that kids’ book about the little engine that could.

“Doesn’t look like it to me. So what’s your plan? I hope you have one.”

She nodded, not meeting my eyes. “Did you know Esme jumped off a cliff? When she was human, I mean.”

“So?”

“So she was close enough to dead that they didn’t even bother taking her to the emergency room—they took her right around to the morgue. Her heart was still beating, though, when Carlisle found her. . . .”

That’s what she’d meant before, about keeping her heart beating.

“You’re not planning on surviving this human,” I stated dully.

"No. I'm not stupid." She met my stare then. "I guess you probably have your own opinion on that point, though."

"Emergency vampirization," I mumbled.

"It worked for Esme. And Emmett, and Rosalie, and even Edward. None of them were in such great shape. Carlisle only changed them because it was that or death. He doesn't end lives, he saves them."

I felt a sudden twinge of guilt about the good vampire doctor, like before. I shoved the thought away and started in on the begging.

"Listen to me, Bells. Don't do it that way." Like before, when the call from Charlie had come, I could see how much difference it really made to me. I realized I needed her to stay alive, in some form. In any form. I took a deep breath. "Don't wait until it's too late, Bella. Not that way. Live. Okay? Just live. Don't do this to me. Don't do it to him."

My voice got harder, louder. "You know what he's going to do when you die. You've seen it before. You want him to go back to those Italian killers?" She cringed into the sofa.

I left out the part about how that wouldn't be necessary this time. Struggling to make my voice softer, I asked, "Remember when I got mangled up by those newborns? What did you tell me?"

I waited, but she wouldn't answer. She pressed her lips together.

"You told me to be good and listen to Carlisle," I reminded her. "And what did I do? I listened to the vampire. For you."

"You listened because it was the right thing to do."

"Okay—pick either reason."

She took a deep breath. "It's not the right thing now." Her gaze touched her big round stomach and she whispered under her breath, "I won't kill him."

My hands shook again. "Oh, I hadn't heard the great news. A bouncing baby boy, huh?

Shoulda brought some blue balloons."

Her face turned pink. The color was so beautiful—it twisted in my stomach like a knife. A serrated knife, rusty and ragged.

I was going to lose this. Again.

"I don't know he's a boy," she admitted, a little sheepish. "The ultrasound wouldn't work. The membrane around the baby is too hard—like their skin. So he's a little mystery. But I always see a boy in my head."

"It's not some pretty baby in there, Bella."

"We'll see," she said. Almost smug.

"You won't," I snarled.

"You're very pessimistic, Jacob. There is definitely a chance that I might walk away from this."

I couldn't answer. I looked down and breathed deep and slow, trying to get a grip on my fury.

"Jake," she said, and she patted my hair, stroked my cheek. "It's going to be okay. Shh. It's okay."

I didn't look up. "No. It will not be okay."

She wiped something wet from my cheek. "Shh."

"What's the deal, Bella?" I stared at the pale carpet. My bare feet were dirty, leaving smudges. Good. "I thought the whole point was that you wanted your vampire more than anything. And now you're just giving him up? That doesn't make any sense. Since when are you desperate to be a mom? If you wanted that so much, why did you marry a vampire?"

I was dangerously close to that offer he wanted me to make. I could see the words taking me that way, but I couldn't change their direction.

She sighed. "It's not like that. I didn't really care about having a baby. I didn't even think about it. It's not just having a baby. It's… well… this baby."

"It's a killer, Bella. Look at yourself."

"He's not. It's me. I'm just weak and human. But I can tough this out, Jake, I can—"

"Aw, come on! Shut up, Bella. You can spout this crap to your bloodsucker, but you're not fooling me. You know you're not going to make it."

She glared at me. "I do not know that. I'm worried about it, sure."

“Worried about it,” I repeated through my teeth.

She gasped then and clutched at her stomach. My fury vanished like a light switch being turned off.

“I’m fine,” she panted. “It’s nothing.”

But I didn’t hear; her hands had pulled her sweatshirt to the side, and I stared, horrified, at the skin it exposed. Her stomach looked like it was stained with big splotches of purple-black ink.

She saw my stare, and she yanked the fabric back in place.

“He’s strong, that’s all,” she said defensively.

The ink spots were bruises.

I almost gagged, and I understood what he’d said, about watching it hurt her. Suddenly, I felt a little crazy myself.

“Bella,” I said.

She heard the change in my voice. She looked up, still breathing heavy, her eyes confused.

“Bella, don’t do this.”

“Jake—”

“Listen to me. Don’t get your back up yet. Okay? Just listen. What if… ?”

“What if what?”

"What if this wasn't a one-shot deal? What if it wasn't all or nothing? What if you just listened to Carlisle like a good girl, and kept yourself alive?"

"I won't—"

"I'm not done yet. So you stay alive. Then you can start over. This didn't work out. Try again."

She frowned. She raised one hand and touched the place where my eyebrows were mashing together. Her fingers smoothed my forehead for a moment while she tried to make sense of it.

"I don't understand.... What do you mean, try again? You can't think Edward would let me... ? And what difference would it make? I'm sure any baby—"

"Yes," I snapped. "Any kid of his would be the same."

Her tired face just got more confused. "What?"

But I couldn't say any more. There was no point. I would never be able to save her from herself. I'd never been able to do that.

Then she blinked, and I could see she got it.

"Oh. Ugh. Please, Jacob. You think I should kill my baby and replace it with some generic substitute? Artificial insemination?" She was mad now. "Why would I want to have some stranger's baby? I suppose it just doesn't make a difference? Any baby will do?"

"I didn't mean that," I muttered. "Not a stranger."

She leaned forward. "Then what are you saying?"

"Nothing. I'm saying nothing. Same as ever."

"Where did that come from?"

"Forget it, Bella."

She frowned, suspicious. "Did he tell you to say that?"

I hesitated, surprised that she'd made that leap so quick. "No."

"He did, didn't he?"

"No, really. He didn't say anything about artificial whatever."

Her face softened then, and she sank back against the pillows, looking exhausted. She stared off to the side when she spoke, not talking to me at all. "He would do anything for me. And I'm hurting him so much.... But what is he thinking? That I would trade this"—her hand traced across her belly—"for some stranger's . . ." She mumbled the last part, and then her voice trailed off. Her eyes were wet.

"You don't have to hurt him," I whispered. It burned like poison in my mouth to beg for him, but I knew this angle was probably my best bet for keeping her alive. Still a thousand-to-one odds. "You could make him happy again, Bella. And I really think he's losing it. Honestly, I do."

She didn't seem to be listening; her hand made small circles on her battered stomach while she chewed on her lip. It was quiet for a long time. I wondered if the

Cullens were very far away. Were they listening to my pathetic attempts to reason with her?

“Not a stranger?” she murmured to herself. I flinched. “What exactly did Edward say to you?” she asked in a low voice.

“Nothing. He just thought you might listen to me.”

“Not that. About trying again.”

Her eyes locked on mine, and I could see that I’d already given too much away.

“Nothing.”

Her mouth fell open a little. “Wow.”

It was silent for a few heartbeats. I looked down at my feet again, unable to meet her stare.

“He really would do anything, wouldn’t he?” she whispered.

“I told you he was going crazy. Literally, Bells.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t tell on him right away. Get him in trouble.”

When I looked up, she was grinning.

“Thought about it.” I tried to grin back, but I could feel the smile mangle on my face. She knew what I was offering, and she wasn’t going to think twice about it. I’d known that she wouldn’t. But it still stung.

"There isn't much you wouldn't do for me, either, is there?" she whispered. "I really don't know why you bother. I don't deserve either of you."

"It makes no difference, though, does it?"

"Not this time." She sighed. "I wish I could explain it to you right so that you would understand. I can't hurt him"—she pointed to her stomach—"any more than I could pick up a gun and shoot you. I love him."

"Why do you always have to love the wrong things, Bella?"

"I don't think I do."

I cleared the lump out of my throat so that I could make my voice hard like I wanted it.

"Trust me."

I started to get to my feet.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm not doing any good here."

She held out her thin hand, pleading. "Don't go."

I could feel the addiction sucking at me, trying to keep me near her.

"I don't belong here. I've got to get back."

"Why did you come today?" she asked, still reaching limply.

"Just to see if you were really alive. I didn't believe you were sick like Charlie said."

I couldn't tell from her face whether she bought that or not.

"Will you come back again? Before . . ."

"I'm not going to hang around and watch you die, Bella."

She flinched. "You're right, you're right. You should go."

I headed for the door.

"Bye," she whispered behind me. "Love you, Jake."

I almost went back. I almost turned around and fell down on my knees and started begging again. But I knew that I had to quit Bella, quit her cold turkey, before she killed me, like she was going to kill him.

"Sure, sure," I mumbled on my way out.

I didn't see any of the vampires. I ignored my bike, standing all alone in the middle of the meadow. It wasn't fast enough for me now. My dad would be freaked out—Sam, too. What would the pack make of the fact that they hadn't heard me phase? Would they think the Cullens got me before I'd had the chance? I stripped down, not caring who might be watching, and started running. I blurred into wolf mid-stride. They were waiting. Of course they were.

Jacob, Jake, eight voices chorused in relief.

Come home now , the Alpha voice ordered. Sam was furious. I felt Paul fade out, and I knew Billy and Rachel were waiting to hear what had happened to

me. Paul was too anxious to give them the good news that I wasn't vampire chow to listen to the whole story.

I didn't have to tell the pack I was on my way—they could see the forest blurring past me as I sprinted for home. I didn't have to tell them that I was half-past crazy, either. The sickness in my head was obvious.

They saw all the horror—Bella's mottled stomach; her raspy voice: he's strong, that's all; the burning man in Edward's face: watching her sicken and waste away… seeing it hurting her; Rosalie crouched over Bella's limp body: Bella's life means nothing to her

— and for once, no one had anything to say.

Their shock was just a silent shout in my head. Wordless.

!!!!

I was halfway home before anyone recovered. Then they all started running to meet me. It was almost dark—the clouds covered the sunset completely. I risked darting across the freeway and made it without being seen.

We met up about ten miles out of La Push, in a clearing left by the loggers. It was out of the way, wedged between two spurs of the mountain, where no one would see us. Paul found them when I did, so the pack was complete.

The babble in my head was total chaos. Everyone shouting at once. Sam's hackles were sticking straight up, and he was growling in an unbroken

stream as he paced back and forth around the top of the ring. Paul and Jared moved like shadows behind him, their ears flat against the sides of their head. The whole circle was agitated, on their feet and snarling in low bursts.

At first their anger was undefined, and I thought I was in for it. I was too messed up to care about that. They could do whatever they wanted to me for circumventing orders. And then the unfocused confusion of thoughts began to move together. How can this be? What does it mean? What will it be?

Not safe. Not right. Dangerous.

Unnatural. Monstrous. An abomination.

We can't allow it.

The pack was pacing in synchronization now, thinking in synchronization, all but myself and one other. I sat beside whichever brother it was, too dazed to look over with either my eyes or my mind and see who was next to me, while the pack circled around us.

The treaty does not cover this.

This puts everyone in danger.

I tried to understand the spiraling voices, tried to follow the curling pathway the thoughts made to see where they were leading, but it wasn't making sense. The pictures in the center of their thoughts were my pictures—the very worst of them. Bella's bruises, Edward's face as he burned.

They fear it, too.

But they won't do anything about it.

Protecting Bella Swan.

We can't let that influence us.

The safety of our families, of everyone here, is more important than one human. If they won't kill it, we have to.

Protect the tribe.

Protect our families.

We have to kill it before it's too late.

Another of my memories, Edward's words this time: The thing is growing. Swiftly. I struggled to focus, to pick out individual voices.

No time to waste, Jared thought.

It will mean a fight, Embry cautioned. A bad one. We're ready, Paul insisted.

We'll need surprise on our side, Sam thought.

If we catch them divided, we can take them down separately. It will increase our chances of victory, Jared thought, starting to strategize now. I shook my head, rising slowly to my feet. I felt unsteady there—like the circling wolves were making me dizzy. The wolf beside me got up, too. His shoulder pushed against mine, propping me up.

Wait, I thought.

The circling paused for one beat, and then they were pacing again. There's little time, Sam said.

But—what are you thinking? You wouldn't attack them for breaking the treaty this afternoon. Now you're planning an ambush, when the treaty is still intact?

This is not something our treaty anticipated, Sam said. This is a danger to every human in the area. We don't know what kind of creature the Cullens have bred, but we know that it is strong and fast-growing. And it will be too young to follow any treaty. Remember the newborn vampires we fought? Wild, violent, beyond the reach of reason or restraint. Imagine one like that, but protected by the Cullens. We don't know— I tried to interrupt.

We don't know, he agreed. And we can't take chances with the unknown in this case. We can only allow the Cullens to exist while we're absolutely sure that they can be trusted not to cause harm. This… thing cannot be trusted.

They don't like it any more than we do.

Sam pulled Rosalie's face, her protective crouch, from my mind and put it on display for everyone.

Some are ready to fight for it, no matter what it is.

It's just a baby , for crying out loud.

Not for long, Leah whispered.

Jake, buddy, this is a big problem, Quil said. We can't just ignore it. You're making it into something bigger

than it is, I argued. The only one who's in danger here is Bella.

Again by her own choice, Sam said. But this time her choice affects us all. I don't think so.

We can't take that chance. We won't allow a blood drinker to hunt on our lands. Then tell them to leave, the wolf who was still supporting me said. It was Seth. Of course.

And inflict the menace on others? When blood drinkers cross our land, we destroy them, no matter where they plan to hunt. We protect everyone we can. This is crazy, I said. This afternoon you were afraid to put the pack in danger. This afternoon I didn't know our families were at risk.

I can't believe this! How're you going to kill this creature without killing Bella?

There were no words, but the silence was full of meaning.

I howled. She's human, too! Doesn't our protection apply to her?

She's dying anyway, Leah thought. We'll just shorten the process. That did it. I leaped away from Seth, toward his sister, with my teeth bared. I was about to catch her left hind leg when I felt Sam's teeth cut into my flank, dragging me back. I howled in pain and fury and turned on him.

Stop! he ordered in the double timbre of the Alpha.

My legs seemed to buckle under me. I jerked to a halt, only managing to keep on my feet by sheer willpower.

He turned his gaze away from me. You will not be cruel to him, Leah, he commanded her. Bella's sacrifice is a heavy price, and we will all recognize that. It is against everything we stand for to take a human life. Making an exception to that code is a bleak thing. We will all mourn for what we do tonight. Tonight? Seth repeated, shocked. Sam—I think we should talk about this some more. Consult with the Elders, at least. You can't seriously mean for us to—

We can't afford your tolerance for the Cullens now. There is no time for debate. You will do as you are told, Seth.

Seth's front knees folded, and his head fell forward under the weight of the Alpha's command.

Sam paced in a tight circle around the two of us.

We need the whole pack for this. Jacob, you are our strongest fighter. You will fight with us tonight. I understand that this is hard for you, so you will concentrate on their fighters—Emmett and Jasper Cullen. You don't have to be involved with the… other part. Quil and Embry will fight with you.

My knees trembled; I struggled to hold myself upright while the voice of the Alpha lashed at my will.

Paul, Jared, and I will take on Edward and Rosalie. I think, from the information Jacob has brought us, they will be the ones guarding Bella. Carlisle and Alice will also be close, possibly Esme. Brady, Collin,

Seth, and Leah will concentrate on them. Whoever has a clear line on— we all heard him mentally stutter over Bella's name —the creature will take it. Destroying the creature is our first priority. The pack rumbled in nervous agreement. The tension had everyone's fur standing on end. The pacing was quicker, and the sound of the paws against the brackish floor was sharper, toenails tearing into the soil.

Only Seth and I were still, the eye in the center of a storm of bared teeth and flattened ears. Seth's nose was almost touching the ground, bowed under Sam's commands. I felt his pain at the coming disloyalty. For him this was a betrayal—during that one day of alliance, fighting beside Edward Cullen, Seth had truly become the vampire's friend. There was no resistance in him, however. He would obey no matter how much it hurt him. He had no other choice.

And what choice did I have? When the Alpha spoke, the pack followed. Sam had never pushed his authority this far before; I knew he honestly hated to see Seth kneeling before him like a slave at the foot of his master. He wouldn't force this if he didn't believe that he had no other choice. He couldn't lie to us when we were linked mind to mind like this. He really believed it was our duty to destroy Bella and the monster she carried. He really believed we had no time to waste. He believed it enough to die for it.

I saw that he would face Edward himself; Edward's ability to read our thoughts made him the greatest threat in Sam's mind. Sam would not let someone else take on that danger.

He saw Jasper as the second-greatest opponent, which is why he'd given him to me. He knew that I had the best chance of any of the pack to win that fight. He'd left the easiest targets for the younger wolves and Leah. Little Alice was no danger without her future vision to guide her, and we knew from our time of alliance that Esme was not a fighter. Carlisle would be more of a challenge, but his hatred of violence would hinder him. I felt sicker than Seth as I watched Sam plan it out, trying to work the angles to give each member of the pack the best chance of survival.

Everything was inside out. This afternoon, I'd been chomping at the bit to attack them. But Seth had been right—it wasn't a fight I'd been ready for. I'd blinded myself with that hate. I hadn't let myself look at it carefully, because I must have known what I would see if I did.

Carlisle Cullen. Looking at him without that hate clouding my eyes, I couldn't deny that killing him was murder. He was good. Good as any human we protected. Maybe better. The others, too, I supposed, but I didn't feel as strongly about them. I didn't know them as well. It was Carlisle who would hate fighting back, even to save his own life. That's why we would be able to kill him—because he wouldn't want us, his enemies, to die. This was wrong.

And it wasn't just because killing Bella felt like killing me, like suicide. Pull it together, Jacob, Sam ordered. The tribe comes first. I was wrong today, Sam.

Your reasons were wrong then. But now we have a duty to fulfill. I braced myself. No.

Sam snarled and stopped pacing in front of me. He stared into my eyes and a deep growl slid between his teeth.

Yes, the Alpha decreed, his double voice blistering with the heat of his authority. There are no loopholes tonight. You, Jacob, are going to fight the Cullens with us. You, with Quil and Embry, will take care of Jasper and Emmett. You are obligated to protect the tribe. That is why you exist. You will perform this obligation. My shoulders hunched as the edict crushed me. My legs collapsed, and I was on my belly under him.

No member of the pack could refuse the Alpha.

# Chapter 11

## THE TWO THINGS AT THE VERY TOP OF MY THINGS-I-NEVER-WANT-TO-DO LIST

Sam started moving the others into formation while I was still on the ground. Embry and Quil were at my sides, waiting for me to recover and take the point. I could feel the drive, the need, to get on my feet and lead them. The compulsion grew, and I fought it uselessly, cringing on the ground where I was.

Embry whined quietly in my ear. He didn't want to think the words, afraid that he would bring me to Sam's attention again. I felt his wordless plea for me to get up, for me to get this over with and be done with it.

There was fear in the pack, not so much for self but for the whole. We couldn't imagine that we would all make it out alive tonight. Which brothers would we lose? Which minds would leave us forever? Which grieving families would we be consoling in the morning?

My mind began to work with theirs, to think in unison, as we dealt with these fears. Automatically, I pushed up from the ground and shook out my coat. Embry and Quil huffed in relief. Quil touched his nose to my side once. Their minds were filled with our challenge, our assignment. We remembered together the nights we'd watched the Cullens practicing for the fight with the newborns. Emmett Cullen was strongest, but Jasper would be the bigger problem.

He moved like a lightning strike—power and speed and death rolled into one. How many centuries'

experience did he have? Enough that all the other Cullens looked to him for guidance. I'll take point, if you want flank, Quil offered. There was more excitement in his mind than most of the others. When Quil had watched Jasper's instruction those nights, he'd been dying to test his skill against the vampire's. For him, this would be a contest. Even knowing it was his life on the line, he saw it that way. Paul was like that, too, and the kids who had never been in battle, Collin and Brady. Seth probably would've been the same—if the opponents were not his friends.

Jake? Quil nudged me. How do you want to roll?

I just shook my head. I couldn't concentrate—the compulsion to follow orders felt like puppet strings hooked into all of my muscles. One foot forward, now another. Seth was dragging behind Collin and Brady—Leah had assumed point there. She ignored Seth while planning with the others, and I could see that she'd rather leave him out of the fight. There was a maternal edge to her feelings for her younger brother. She wished Sam would send him home. Seth didn't register Leah's doubts. He was adjusting to the puppet strings, too.

Maybe if you stopped resisting..., Embry whispered.

Just focus on our part. The big ones. We can take them down. We own them! Quil was working himself up—like a pep talk before a big game.

I could see how easy it would be—to think about nothing more than my part. It wasn't hard to imaging attacking Jasper and Emmett. We'd been close to that before. I'd thought of them as enemies for a very long time. I could do that now again. I just had to forget that they were protecting the same thing I would protect. I had to forget the reason why I might want them to win....

Jake, Embry warned. Keep your head in the game. My feet moved sluggishly, pulling against the drag of the strings. There's no point fighting it, Embry whispered again.

He was right. I would end up doing what Sam wanted, if he was willing to push it. And he was. Obviously.

There was a good reason for the Alpha's authority. Even a pack as strong as ours wasn't much of a force without a leader. We had to move together, to think together, in order to be effective. And that required the body to have a head.

So what if Sam was wrong now? There was nothing anyone could do. No one could dispute his decision.

Except.

And there it was—a thought I'd never, never wanted to have. But now, with my legs all tied up in strings, I recognized the exception with relief—more than relief, with a fierce joy.

No one could dispute the Alpha's decision—except for me. I hadn't earned anything. But there were things

that had been born in me, things that I'd left unclaimed.

I'd never wanted to lead the pack. I didn't want to do it now. I didn't want the responsibility for all our fates resting on my shoulders. Sam was better at that than I would ever be.

But he was wrong tonight.

And I had not been born to kneel to him.

The bonds fell off my body the second that I embraced my birthright. I could feel it gathering in me, both a freedom and also a strange, hollow power. Hollow because an Alpha's power came from his pack, and I had no pack. For a second, loneliness overwhelmed me.

I had no pack now.

But I was straight and strong as I walked to where Sam stood, planning with Paul and Jared. He turned at the sound of my advance, and his black eyes narrowed. No, I told him again.

He heard it right away, heard the choice that I'd made in the sound of the Alpha voice in my thoughts.

He jumped back a half step with a shocked yelp.

Jacob? What have you done?

I won't follow you, Sam. Not for something so wrong.

He stared at me, stunned. You would… you would choose your enemies over your family?

They aren't— I shook my head, clearing it —they aren't our enemies. They never have been. Until I really thought about destroying them, thought it through, I didn't see that. This isn't about them, he snarled at me. This is about Bella. She has never been the one for you, she has never chosen you, but you continue to destroy your life for her!

They were hard words, but true words. I sucked in a big gulp of air, breathing them in. Maybe you're right. But you're going to destroy the pack over her, Sam. No matter how many of them survive tonight, they will always have murder on their hands. We have to protect our families!

I know what you've decided, Sam. But you don't decide for me, not anymore. Jacob—you can't turn your back on the tribe.

I heard the double echo of his Alpha command, but it was weightless this time. It no longer applied to me. He clenched his jaw, trying to force me to respond to his words. I stared into his furious eyes. Ephraim Black's son was not born to follow Levi Uley's. Is this it, then, Jacob Black ? His hackles rose and his muzzle pulled back from his teeth. Paul and Jared snarled and bristled at his sides. Even if you can defeat me, the pack will never follow you!

Now I jerked back, a surprised whine escaping my throat. Defeat you? I'm not going to fight you, Sam.

Then what's your plan? I'm not stepping aside so that you can protect the vampire spawn at the tribe's expense.

I'm not telling you to step aside.

If you order them to follow you—

I'll never take anyone's will away from him.

His tail whipped back and forth as he recoiled from the judgment in my words. Then he took a step forward so that we were toe to toe, his exposed teeth inches from mine. I hadn't noticed till this moment that I'd grown taller than him. There cannot be more than one Alpha. The pack has chosen me. Will you rip us apart tonight? Will you turn on your brothers? Or will you end this insanity and join us again? Every word was layered with command, but it couldn't touch me. Alpha blood ran undiluted in my veins.

I could see why there was never more than one Alpha male in a pack. My body was responding to the challenge. I could feel the instinct to defend my claim rising in me. The primitive core of my wolf-self tensed for the battle of supremacy. I focused all my energy to control that reaction. I would not fall into a pointless, destructive fight with Sam. He was my brother still, even though I was rejecting him. There is only one Alpha for this pack. I'm not contesting that. I'm just choosing to go my own way.

Do you belong to a coven now, Jacob?

I flinched.

I don't know, Sam. But I do know this—

He shrunk back as he felt the weight of the Alpha in my tone. It affected him more than his touched me. Because I had been born to lead him.

I will stand between you and the Cullens. I won't just watch while the pack kills innocent— it was hard to apply that word to vampires, but it was true— people. The pack is better than that. Lead them in the right direction, Sam. I turned my back on him, and a chorus of howls tore into the air around me. Digging my nails into the earth, I raced away from the uproar I'd caused. I didn't have much time. At least Leah was the only one with a prayer of outrunning me, and I had a head start.

The howling faded with the distance, and I took comfort as the sound continued to rip apart the quiet night. They weren't after me yet.

I had to warn the Cullens before the pack could get it together and stop me. If the Cullens were prepared, it might give Sam a reason to rethink this before it was too late. I sprinted toward the white house I still hated, leaving my home behind me. Home didn't belong to me anymore. I'd turned my back on it.

Today had begun like any other day. Made it home from patrol with the rainy sunrise, breakfast with Billy and Rachel, bad TV, bickering with Paul… How did it change so completely, turn all surreal? How did everything get messed up and twisted so that I was here now, all alone, an unwilling Alpha, cut off from my brothers, choosing vampires over them?

The sound I'd been fearing interrupted my dazed thoughts—it was the soft impact of big paws against the ground, chasing after me. I threw myself forward, rocketing through the black forest. I just had to get

close enough so that Edward could hear the warning in my head. Leah wouldn't be able to stop me alone.

And then I caught the mood of the thoughts behind me. Not anger, but enthusiasm. Not chasing… but following.

My stride broke. I staggered two steps before it evened out again. Wait up. My legs aren't as long as yours.

SETH! What do you think you're DOING? GO HOME!

He didn't answer, but I could feel his excitement as he kept right on after me. I could see through his eyes as he could see through mine. The night scene was bleak for me—

full of despair. For him, it was hopeful.

I hadn't realized I was slowing down, but suddenly he was on my flank, running in position beside me.

I am not joking, Seth! This is no place for you. Get out of here. The gangly tan wolf snorted. I've got your back, Jacob. I think you're right. And I'm not going to stand behind Sam when—

Oh yes you are the hell going to stand behind Sam! Get your furry butt back to La Push and do what Sam tells you to do.

No.

Go, Seth!

Is that an order , Jacob?

His question brought me up short. I skidded to a halt, my nails gouging furrows in the mud.

I'm not ordering anyone to do anything. I'm just telling you what you already know. He plopped down on his haunches beside me. I'll tell you what I know—I know that it's awful quiet. Haven't you noticed?

I blinked. My tail swished nervously as I realized what he was thinking underneath the words. It wasn't quiet in one sense. Howls still filled the air, far away in the west. They haven't phased back, Seth said.

I knew that. The pack would be on red alert now. They would be using the mind link to see all sides clearly. But I couldn't hear what they were thinking. I could only hear Seth. No one else.

Looks to me like separate packs aren't linked. Huh. Guess there was no reason for our fathers to know that before. 'Cause there was no reason for separate packs before. Never enough wolves for two. Wow. It's really quiet. Sort of eerie. But also kinda nice, don't you think? I bet it was easier, like this, for Ephraim and Quil and Levi. Not such a babble with just three. Or just two.

Shut up, Seth.

Yes, sir.

Stop that! There are not two packs. There is THE pack, and then there is me. That's all. So you can go home now.

If there aren't two packs, then why can we hear each other and not the rest? I think that when you turned

your back on Sam, that was a pretty significant move. A change. And when I followed you away, I think that was significant, too. You've got a point, I conceded. But what can change can change right back. He got up and started trotting toward the east. No time to argue about it now. We should be moving right along before Sam…

He was right about that part. There was no time for this argument. I fell into a run again, not pushing myself quite as hard. Seth stayed on my heels, holding the Second's traditional place on my right flank.

I can run somewhere else, he thought, his nose dipping a little. I didn't follow you because I was after a promotion.

Run wherever you want. Makes no difference to me.

There was no sound of pursuit, but we both stepped it up a little at the same time. I was worried now. If I couldn't tap into the pack's mind, it was going to make this more difficult. I'd have no more advance warning of attack than the Cullens. We'll run patrols, Seth suggested.

And what do we do if the pack challenges us? My eyes tightened. Attack our brothers?

Your sister?

No—we sound the alarm and fall back.

Good answer. But then what? I don't think…

I know, he agreed. Less confident now. I don't think I can fight them, either. But they won't be any happier with the idea of attacking us than we are with attacking them. That might be enough to stop them right there. Plus, there're only eight of them now. Stop being so… Took me a minute to decide on the right word. Optimistic. It's getting on my nerves.

No problem. You want me to be all doom and gloom, or just shut up?

Just shut up.

Can do.

Really? Doesn't seem like it.

He was finally quiet.

And then we were across the road and moving through the forest that ringed the Cullens' house. Could Edward hear us yet?

Maybe we should be thinking something like, "We come in peace."

Go for it.

Edward? He called the name tentatively. Edward, you there? Okay, now I feel kinda stupid.

You sound stupid, too.

Think he can hear us?

We were less than a mile out now. I think so. Hey, Edward. If you can hear me—circle the wagons, bloodsucker. You've got a problem.

We've got a problem, Seth corrected.

Then we broke through the trees into the big lawn. The house was dark, but not empty. Edward stood on the porch between Emmett and Jasper. They were snow white in the pale light.

"Jacob? Seth? What's going on?"

I slowed and then paced back a few steps. The smell was so sharp through this nose that it felt like it was honestly burning me. Seth whined quietly, hesitating, and then he fell back behind me.

To answer Edward's question, I let my mind run over the confrontation with Sam, moving through it backward. Seth thought with me, filling in the gaps, showing the scene from another angle. We stopped when we got to the part about the "abomination,"

because Edward hissed furiously and leaped off the porch.

"They want to kill Bella?" he snarled flatly.

Emmett and Jasper, not having heard the first part of the conversation, took his inflectionless question for a statement. They were right next to him in a flash, teeth exposed as they moved on us.

Hey, now, Seth thought, backing away.

"Em, Jazz—not them! The others. The pack is coming."

Emmett and Jasper rocked back on their heels; Emmett turned to Edward while Jasper kept his eyes locked on us.

“What’s their problem?” Emmett demanded.

“The same one as mine,” Edward hissed. “But they have their own plan to handle it. Get the others. Call Carlisle! He and Esme have to get back here now.”

I whined uneasily. They were separated.

“They aren’t far,” Edward said in the same dead voice as before. I’m going to go take a look, Seth said. Run the western perimeter.

“Will you be in danger, Seth?” Edward asked.

Seth and I exchanged a glance.

Don’t think so, we thought together. And then I added, But maybe I should go. Just in case…

They’ll be less likely to challenge me, Seth pointed out. I’m just a kid to them. You’re just a kid to me, kid.

I’m outta here. You need to coordinate with the Cullens.

He wheeled and darted into the darkness. I wasn’t going to order Seth around, so I let him go.

Edward and I stood facing each other in the dark meadow. I could hear Emmett muttering into his phone. Jasper was watching the place where Seth had vanished into the woods. Alice appeared on the porch and then, after staring at me with anxious eyes

for a long moment, she flitted to Jasper's side. I guessed that Rosalie was inside with Bella. Still guarding her—from the wrong dangers.

"This isn't the first time I've owed you my gratitude, Jacob," Edward whispered. "I would never have asked for this from you."

I thought of what he'd asked me for earlier today. When it came to Bella, there were no lines he wouldn't cross. Yeah, you would.

He thought about it and then nodded. "I suppose you're right about that."

I sighed heavily. Well, this isn't the first time that I didn't do it for you.

"Right," he murmured.

Sorry I didn't do any good today. Told you she wouldn't listen to me.

"I know. I never really believed she would. But . . ."

You had to try. I get it. She any better?

His voice and eyes went hollow. "Worse," he breathed.

I didn't want to let that word sink in. I was grateful when Alice spoke.

"Jacob, would you mind switching forms?" Alice asked. "I want to know what's going on."

I shook my head at the same time Edward answered.

"He needs to stay linked to Seth."

“Well, then would you be so kind as to tell me what’s happening?”

He explained in clipped, emotionless sentences. “The pack thinks Bella’s become a problem. They foresee potential danger from the… from what she’s carrying. They feel it’s their duty to remove that danger. Jacob and Seth disbanded from the pack to warn us. The rest are planning to attack tonight.”

Alice hissed, leaning away from me. Emmett and Jasper exchanged a glance, and then their eyes ranged across the trees.

Nobody out here, Seth reported. All’s quiet on the western front. They may go around.

I’ll make a loop.

“Carlisle and Esme are on their way,” Emmett said. “Twenty minutes, tops.”

“We should take up a defensive position,” Jasper said.

Edward nodded. “Let’s get inside.”

I’ll run perimeter with Seth. If I get too far for you to hear my head, listen for my howl.

“I will.”

They backed into the house, eyes flickering everywhere. Before they were inside, I turned and ran toward the west.

I’m still not finding much, Seth told me.

I’ll take half the circle. Move fast—we don’t want them to have a chance to sneak past us.

Seth lurched forward in a sudden burst of speed.

We ran in silence, and the minutes passed. I listened to the noises around him, doublechecking his judgment. Hey—something coming up fast! he warned me after fifteen minutes of silence. On my way!

Hold your position—I don’t think it’s the pack. It sounds different. Seth—

But he caught the approaching scent on the breeze, and I read it in his mind. Vampire. Bet it’s Carlisle.

Seth, fall back. It might be someone else.

No, it’s them. I recognize the scent. Hold up, I’m going to phase to explain it to them. Seth, I don’t think—

But he was gone.

Anxiously, I raced along the western border. Wouldn’t it be just peachy if I couldn’t take care of Seth for one freaking night? What if something happened to him on my watch?

Leah would shred me into kibble.

At least the kid kept it short. It wasn’t two minutes later when I felt him in my head again.

Yep, Carlisle and Esme. Boy, were they surprised to see me! They’re probably inside by now. Carlisle said thanks.

He’s a good guy.

Yeah. That's one of the reasons why we're right about this. Hope so.

Why're you so down, Jake? I'll bet Sam won't bring the pack tonight. He's not going to launch a suicide mission.

I sighed. It didn't seem to matter, either way.

Oh. This isn't about Sam so much, is it?

I made the turn at the end of my patrol. I caught Seth's scent where he'd turned last. We weren't leaving any gaps.

You think Bella's going to die anyway, Seth whispered. Yeah, she is.

Poor Edward. He must be crazy.

Literally.

Edward's name brought other memories boiling to the surface. Seth read them in astonishment.

And then he was howling. Oh, man! No way! You did not ! That just plain ol' sucks rocks, Jacob! And you know it, too! I can't believe you said you'd kill him. What is that?

You have to tell him no.

Shut up, shut up, you idiot! They're going to think the pack is coming!

Oops! He cut off mid-howl.

I wheeled and started loping in toward the house. *Just keep out of this, Seth. Take the whole circle for now.*

Seth seethed and I ignored him.

*False alarm, false alarm,* I thought as I ran closer in. *Sorry. Seth is young. He forgets things. No one's attacking. False alarm.*

When I got to the meadow, I could see Edward staring out of a dark window. I ran in, wanting to be sure he got the message.

*There's nothing out there—you got that?*

He nodded once.

This would be a lot easier if the communication wasn't one way. Then again, I was kinda glad I wasn't in his head.

He looked over his shoulder, back into the house, and I saw a shudder run through his whole frame. He waved me away without looking in my direction again and then moved out of my view.

*What's going on?*

Like I was going to get an answer.

I sat very still in the meadow and listened. With these ears, I could almost hear Seth's soft footfalls, miles out into the forest. It was easy to hear every sound inside the dark house.

"It was a false alarm," Edward was explaining in that dead voice, just repeating what I'd told him. "Seth was

upset about something else, and he forgot we were listening for a signal. He's very young."

"Nice to have toddlers guarding the fort," a deeper voice grumbled. Emmett, I thought.

"They've done us a great service tonight, Emmett," Carlisle said. "At great personal sacrifice."

"Yeah, I know. I'm just jealous. Wish I was out there."

"Seth doesn't think Sam will attack now," Edward said mechanically. "Not with us forewarned, and lacking two members of the pack."

"What does Jacob think?" Carlisle asked.

"He's not as optimistic."

No one spoke. There was a quiet dripping sound that I couldn't place. I heard their low breathing—and I could separate Bella's from the rest. It was harsher, labored. It hitched and broke in strange rhythms. I could hear her heart. It seemed… too fast. I paced it against my own heartbeat, but I wasn't sure if that was any measure. It wasn't like I was normal.

"Don't touch her! You'll wake her up," Rosalie whispered.

Someone sighed.

"Rosalie," Carlisle murmured.

"Don't start with me, Carlisle. We let you have your way earlier, but that's all we're allowing."

It seemed like Rosalie and Bella were both talking in plurals now. Like they'd formed a pack of their own.

I paced quietly in front of the house. Each pass brought me a little closer. The dark windows were like a TV set running in some dull waiting room—it was impossible to keep my eyes off them for long.

A few more minutes, a few more passes, and my fur was brushing the side of the porch as I paced.

I could see up through the windows—see the top of the walls and the ceiling, the unlit chandelier that hung there. I was tall enough that all I would have to do was stretch my neck a little… and maybe one paw up on the edge of the porch….

I peeked into the big, open front room, expecting to see something very similar to the scene this afternoon. But it had changed so much that I was confused at first. For a second I thought I'd gotten the wrong room.

The glass wall was gone—it looked like metal now. And the furniture was all dragged out of the way, with Bella curled up awkwardly on a narrow bed in the center of the open space. Not a normal bed—one with rails like in a hospital. Also like a hospital were the monitors strapped to her body, the tubes stuck into her skin. The lights on the monitors flashed, but there was no sound. The dripping noise was from the IV plugged into her arm—some fluid that was thick and white, not clear.

She choked a little in her uneasy sleep, and both Edward and Rosalie moved in to hover over her. Her

body jerked, and she whimpered. Rosalie smoothed her hand across Bella's forehead. Edward's body stiffened—his back was to me, but his expression must have been something to see, because Emmett wrenched himself between them before there was time to blink. He held his hands up to Edward.

"Not tonight, Edward. We've got other things to worry about."

Edward turned away from them, and he was the burning man again. His eyes met mine for one moment, and then I dropped back to all fours.

I ran back into the dark forest, running to join Seth, running away from what was behind me.

Worse. Yes, she was worse.

# Chapter 12

## SOME PEOPLE JUST DON'T GRASP THE CONCEPT OF "UNWELCOME"

I was right on the edge of sleep.

The sun had risen behind the clouds an hour ago—the forest was gray now instead of black. Seth'd curled up and passed out around one, and I'd woken him at dawn to trade off. Even after running all night, I was having a hard time making my brain shut up long enough to fall asleep, but Seth's rhythmic run was helping. One, two-three, four, one, two-three, four— dum dum-dum dum—dull paw thuds against the damp earth, over and over as he made the wide circuit surrounding the Cullens' land. We were already wearing a trail into the ground. Seth's thoughts were empty, just a blur of green and gray as the woods flew past him. It was restful. It helped to fill my head with what he saw rather than letting my own images take center stage.

And then Seth's piercing howl broke the early morning quiet.

I lurched up from the ground, my front legs pulling toward a sprint before my hind legs were off the ground. I raced toward the place where Seth had frozen, listening with him to the tread of paws running in our direction.

Morning, boys.

A shocked whine broke through Seth's teeth. And then we both snarled as we read deeper into the new thoughts.

Oh, man! Go away , Leah! Seth groaned.

I stopped when I got to Seth, head thrown back, ready to howl again—this time to complain.

Cut the noise, Seth.

Right. Ugh! Ugh! Ugh! He whimpered and pawed at the ground, scratching deep furrows in the dirt.

Leah trotted into view, her small gray body weaving through the underbrush. Stop whining, Seth. You're such a baby.

I growled at her, my ears flattening against my skull. She skipped back a step automatically.

What do you think you're doing, Leah?

She huffed a heavy sigh. It's pretty obvious, isn't it? I'm joining your crappy little renegade pack. The vampires' guard dogs. She barked out a low, sarcastic laugh. No, you're not. Turn around before I rip out one of your hamstrings. Like you could catch me. She grinned and coiled her body for launch. Wanna race, O

fearless leader?

I took a deep breath, filling my lungs until my sides bulged. Then, when I was sure I wasn't going to scream, I exhaled in a gust.

Seth, go let the Cullens know that it's just your stupid sister—I thought the words as harshly as possible. I'll deal with this.

On it! Seth was only too happy to leave. He vanished toward the house. Leah whined, and she leaned after him, the fur on her shoulders rising. You're just going to let him run off to the vampires alone?

I'm pretty sure he'd rather they took him out than spend another minute with you. Shut up, Jacob. Oops, I'm sorry—I meant, shut up, most high Alpha. Why the hell are you here?

You think I'm just going to sit home while my little brother volunteers as a vampire chew toy?

Seth doesn't want or need your protection. In fact, no one wants you here. Oooh, ouch, that's gonna leave a huge mark. Ha, she barked. Tell me who does want me around, and I'm outta here.

So this isn't about Seth at all, is it?

Of course it is. I'm just pointing out that being unwanted is not a first for me. Not really a motivating factor, if you know what I mean.

I gritted my teeth and tried to get my head straight.

Did Sam send you?

If I was here on Sam's errand, you wouldn't be able to hear me. My allegiance is no longer with him.

I listened carefully to the thoughts mixed in with the words. If this was a diversion or a ploy, I had to be

alert enough to see through it. But there was nothing. Her declaration was nothing but the truth. Unwilling, almost despairing truth.

You're loyal to me now? I asked with deep sarcasm. Uh-huh. Right. My choices are limited. I'm working with the options I've got. Trust me, I'm not enjoying this any more than you are.

That wasn't true. There was an edgy kind of excitement in her mind. She was unhappy about this, but she was also riding some weird high. I searched her mind, trying to understand.

She bristled, resenting the intrusion. I usually tried to tune Leah out—I'd never tried to make sense of her before.

We were interrupted by Seth, thinking his explanation at Edward. Leah whined anxiously. Edward's face, framed in the same window as last night, showed no reaction to the news. It was a blank face, dead.

Wow, he looks bad, Seth muttered to himself. The vampire showed no reaction to that thought, either. He disappeared into the house. Seth pivoted and headed back out to us. Leah relaxed a little.

What's going on? Leah asked. Catch me up to speed. There's no point. You're not staying.

Actually, Mr. Alpha, I am. Because since apparently I have to belong to someone —and don't think I haven't tried breaking off on my own, you know yourself how well that doesn't work—I choose you.

Leah, you don't like me. I don't like you.

Thank you, Captain Obvious. That doesn't matter to me. I'm staying with Seth. You don't like vampires. Don't you think that's a little conflict of interest right there?

You don't like vampires either.

But I am committed to this alliance. You aren't.

I'll keep my distance from them. I can run patrols out here, just like Seth. And I'm supposed to trust you with that?

She stretched her neck, leaning up on her toes, trying to be as tall as me as she stared into my eyes. I will not betray my pack.

I wanted to throw my head back and howl, like Seth had before. This isn't your pack!

This isn't even a pack. This is just me, going off on my own! What is it with you Clearwaters? Why can't you leave me alone?

Seth, just coming up behind us now, whined; I'd offended him. Great. I've been helpful, haven't I, Jake?

You haven't made too much a nuisance of yourself, kid, but if you and Leah are a package deal—if the only way to get rid of her is for you to go home.... Well, can you blame me for wanting you gone?

Ugh, Leah, you ruin everything!

Yeah, I know, she told him, and the thought was loaded with the heaviness of her despair.

I felt the pain in the three little words, and it was more than I would've guessed. I didn't want to feel that. I didn't want to feel bad for her. Sure, the pack was rough on her, but she brought it all on herself with the bitterness that tainted her every thought and made being in her head a nightmare.

Seth was feeling guilty, too. Jake… You're not really gonna send me away, are you?

Leah's not so bad. Really. I mean, with her here, we can push the perimeter out farther. And this puts Sam down to seven. There's no way he's going to mount an attack that outnumbered. It's probably a good thing….

You know I don't want to lead a pack, Seth.

So don't lead us, Leah offered.

I snorted. Sounds perfect to me. Run along home now.

Jake, Seth thought. I belong here. I do like vampires. Cullens, anyway. They're people to me, and I'm going to protect them, 'cause that's what we're supposed to do. Maybe you belong, kid, but your sister doesn't. And she's going to go wherever you are

—

I stopped short, because I saw something when I said that. Something Leah had been trying not to think.

Leah wasn't going anywhere.

Thought this was about Seth, I thought sourly.

She flinched. Of course I'm here for Seth.

And to get away from Sam.

Her jaw clenched. I don't have to explain myself to you. I just have to do what I'm told. I belong to your pack, Jacob. The end.

I paced away from her, growling.

Crap. I was never going to get rid of her. As much as she disliked me, as much as she loathed the Cullens, as happy as she'd be to go kill all the vampires right now, as much as it pissed her off to have to protect them instead—none of that was anything compared to what she felt being free of Sam.

Leah didn't like me, so it wasn't such a chore having me wish she would disappear. She loved Sam. Still. And having him wish she would disappear was more pain than she was willing to live with, now that she had a choice. She would have taken any other option. Even if it meant moving in with the Cullens as their lapdog. I don't know if I'd go that far, she thought. She tried to make the words tough, aggressive, but there were big cracks in her show. I'm sure I'd give killing myself a few good tries first.

Look, Leah…

No, you look, Jacob. Stop arguing with me, because it's not going to do any good. I'll stay out of your way, okay? I'll do anything you want. Except go back to Sam's pack and be the pathetic ex-girlfriend he can't get away from. If you want me to leave—she sat back

on her haunches and stared straight into my eyes—you're going to have to make me.

I snarled for a long, angry minute. I was beginning to feel some sympathy for Sam, despite what he had done to me, to Seth. No wonder he was always ordering the pack around. How else would you ever get anything done?

Seth, are you gonna get mad at me if I kill your sister?

He pretended to think about it for a minute. Well… yeah, probably. I sighed.

Okay, then, Ms. Do-Anything-I-Want. Why don't you make yourself useful by telling us what you know? What happened after we left last night?

Lots of howling. But you probably heard that part. It was so loud that it took us a while to figure out that we couldn't hear either of you anymore. Sam was… Words failed her, but we could see it in our head. Both Seth and I cringed. After that, it was clear pretty quick that we were going to have to rethink things. Sam was planning to talk to the other Elders first thing this morning. We were supposed to meet up and figure out a game plan. I could tell he wasn't going to mount another attack right away, though. Suicide at this point, with you and Seth AWOL and the bloodsuckers forewarned. I'm not sure what they'll do, but I wouldn't be wandering the forest alone if I was a leech. It's open season on vamps now.

You decided to skip the meeting this morning? I asked. When we split up for patrols last night, I asked

permission to go home, to tell my mother what had happened—

Crap! You told Mom? Seth growled.

Seth, hold off on the sibling stuff for a sec. Go on, Leah. So once I was human, I took a minute to think things through. Well, actually, I took all night. I bet the others think I fell asleep. But the whole two-separate-packs, two- separate-pack-minds thing gave me a lot to sift through. In the end, I weighed Seth's safety and the, er, other benefits against the idea of turning traitor and sniffing vampire stink for who knows how long. You know what I decided. I left a note for my mom. I expect we'll hear it when Sam finds out....

Leah cocked an ear to the west.

Yeah, I expect we will, I agreed.

So that's everything. What do we do now? she asked.

She and Seth both looked at me expectantly.

This was exactly the kind of thing I didn't want to have to do. I guess we just keep an eye out for now. That's all we can do. You should probably take a nap, Leah.

You've had as much sleep as I have.

Thought you were going to do what you were told?

Right. That's going to get old, she grumbled, and then she yawned. Well, whatever. I don't care.

I'll run the border, Jake. I'm not tired at all. Seth was so glad I hadn't forced them home, he was all but prancing with excitement.

Sure, sure. I'm going to go check in with the Cullens.

Seth took off along the new path worn into the damp earth. Leah looked after him thoughtfully.

Maybe a round or two before I crash.... Hey Seth, wanna see how many times I can lap you?

NO!

Barking out a low chuckle, Leah lunged into the woods after him. I growled uselessly. So much for peace and quiet.

Leah was trying—for Leah. She kept her jibes to a minimum as she raced around the circuit, but it was impossible not to be aware of her smug mood. I thought of the whole

"two's company" saying. It didn't really apply, because one was plenty to my mind. But if there had to be three of us, it was hard to think of anyone that I wouldn't trade her for. Paul? she suggested.

Maybe, I allowed.

She laughed to herself, too jittery and hyper to get offended. I wondered how long the buzz from dodging Sam's pity would last.

That will be my goal, then—to be less annoying than Paul.

Yeah, work on that.

I changed into my other form when I was a few yards from the lawn. I hadn't been planning to spend much time human here. But I hadn't been planning to have Leah in my head, either. I pulled on my ragged shorts and started across the lawn. The door opened before I got to the steps, and I was surprised to see Carlisle rather than Edward step outside to meet me—his face looked exhausted and defeated. For a second, my heart froze. I faltered to a stop, unable to speak.

"Are you all right, Jacob?" Carlisle asked.

"Is Bella?" I choked out.

"She's… much the same as last night. Did I startle you? I'm sorry. Edward said you were coming in your human form, and I came out to greet you, as he didn't want to leave her. She's awake."

And Edward didn't want to lose any time with her, because he didn't have much time left. Carlisle didn't say the words out loud, but he might as well have. It had been a while since I'd slept—since before my last patrol. I could really feel that now. I took a step forward, sat down on the porch steps, and slumped against the railing. Moving whisper-quiet as only a vampire could, Carlisle took a seat on the same step, against the other railing.

"I didn't get a chance to thank you last night, Jacob. You don't know how much I appreciate your… compassion. I know your goal was to protect Bella, but I owe you the safety of the rest of my family as well. Edward told me what you had to do. . . ."

"Don't mention it," I muttered.

"If you prefer."

We sat in silence. I could hear the others in the house. Emmett, Alice, and Jasper, speaking in low, serious voices upstairs. Esme humming tunelessly in another room. Rosalie and Edward breathing close by—I couldn't tell which was which, but I could hear the difference in Bella's labored panting. I could hear her heart, too. It seemed…

uneven.

It was like fate was out to make me do everything I'd ever sworn I wouldn't in the course of twenty-four hours. Here I was, hanging around, waiting for her to die. I didn't want to listen anymore. Talking was better than listening.

"She's family to you?" I asked Carlisle. It had caught my notice before, when he'd said I'd helped the rest of his family, too.

"Yes. Bella is already a daughter to me. A beloved daughter."

"But you're going to let her die."

He was quiet long enough that I looked up. His face was very, very tired. I knew how he felt.

"I can imagine what you think of me for that," he finally said. "But I can't ignore her will. It wouldn't be right to make such a choice for her, to force her."

I wanted to be angry with him, but he was making it hard. It was like he was throwing my own words back at me, just scrambled up. They'd sounded right

before, but they couldn't be right now. Not with Bella dying. Still… I remembered how it felt to be broken on the ground under Sam—to have no choice but be involved in the murder of someone I loved. It wasn't the same, though. Sam was wrong. And Bella loved things she shouldn't.

"Do you think there's any chance she'll make it? I mean, as a vampire and all that. She told me about… about Esme."

"I'd say there's an even chance at this point," he answered quietly. "I've seen vampire venom work miracles, but there are conditions that even venom cannot overcome. Her heart is working too hard now; if it should fail… there won't be anything for me to do."

Bella's heartbeat throbbed and faltered, giving an agonizing emphasis to his words. Maybe the planet had started turning backward. Maybe that would explain how everything was the opposite of what it had been yesterday—how I could be hoping for what had once seemed like the very worst thing in the world.

"What is that thing doing to her?" I whispered. "She was so much worse last night. I saw… the tubes and all that. Through the window."

"The fetus isn't compatible with her body. Too strong, for one thing, but she could probably endure that for a while. The bigger problem is that it won't allow her to get the sustenance she needs. Her body is rejecting every form of nutrition. I'm trying to feed her intravenously, but she's just not absorbing it.

Everything about her condition is accelerated. I'm watching her—and not just her, but the fetus as well—starve to death by the hour. I can't stop it and I can't slow it down. I can't figure out what it wants." His weary voice broke at the end.

I felt the same way I had yesterday, when I'd seen the black stains across her stomach—

furious, and a little crazy.

I clenched my hands into fists to control the shaking. I hated the thing that was hurting her. It wasn't enough for the monster to beat her from the inside out. No, it was starving her, too. Probably just looking for something to sink its teeth into—a throat to suck dry. Since it wasn't big enough to kill anyone else yet, it settled for sucking Bella's life from her.

I could tell them exactly what it wanted: death and blood, blood and death. My skin was all hot and prickly. I breathed slowly in and out, focusing on that to calm myself.

"I wish I could get a better idea of what exactly it is," Carlisle murmured. "The fetus is well protected. I haven't been able to produce an ultrasonic image. I doubt there is any way to get a needle through the amniotic sac, but Rosalie won't agree to let me try, in any case."

"A needle?" I mumbled. "What good would that do?"

"The more I know about the fetus, the better I can estimate what it will be capable of. What I wouldn't

give for even a little amniotic fluid. If I knew even the chromosomal count . . .”

“You’re losing me, Doc. Can you dumb it down?”

He chuckled once—even his laugh sounded exhausted. “Okay. How much biology have you taken? Did you study chromosomal pairs?”

“Think so. We have twenty-three, right?”

“Humans do.”

I blinked. “How many do you have?”

“Twenty-five.”

I frowned at my fists for a second. “What does that mean?”

“I thought it meant that our species were almost completely different. Less related than a lion and a house cat. But this new life—well, it suggests that we’re more genetically compatible than I’d thought.” He sighed sadly. “I didn’t know to warn them.”

I sighed, too. It had been easy to hate Edward for the same ignorance. I still hated him for it. It was just hard to feel the same way about Carlisle. Maybe because I wasn’t ten shades of jealous in Carlisle’s case.

“It might help to know what the count was—whether the fetus was closer to us or to her. To know what to expect.” Then he shrugged. “And maybe it wouldn’t help anything. I guess I just wish I had something to study, anything to do.”

"Wonder what my chromosomes are like," I muttered randomly. I thought of those Olympic steroids tests again. Did they run DNA scans?

Carlisle coughed self-consciously. "You have twenty-four pairs, Jacob."

I turned slowly to stare at him, raising my eyebrows.

He looked embarrassed. "I was… curious. I took the liberty when I was treating you last June."

I thought about it for a second. "I guess that should piss me off. But I don't really care."

"I'm sorry. I should have asked."

"S'okay, Doc. You didn't mean any harm."

"No, I promise you that I did not mean you any harm. It's just that… I find your species fascinating. I suppose that the elements of vampiric nature have come to seem commonplace to me over the centuries. Your family's divergence from humanity is much more interesting. Magical, almost."

"Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo," I mumbled. He was just like Bella with all the magic garbage. Carlisle laughed another weary laugh.

Then we heard Edward's voice inside the house, and we both paused to listen.

"I'll be right back, Bella. I want to speak with Carlisle for a moment. Actually, Rosalie, would you mind accompanying me?" Edward sounded different. There was a little life in his dead voice. A spark of

something. Not hope exactly, but maybe the desire to hope.

"What is it, Edward?" Bella asked hoarsely.

"Nothing you need to worry about, love. It will just take a second. Please, Rose?"

"Esme?" Rosalie called. "Can you mind Bella for me?"

I heard the whisper of wind as Esme flitted down the stairs.

"Of course," she said.

Carlisle shifted, twisting to look expectantly at the door. Edward was through the door first, with Rosalie right on his heels. His face was, like his voice, no longer dead. He seemed intensely focused. Rosalie looked suspicious.

Edward shut the door behind her.

"Carlisle," he murmured.

"What is it, Edward?"

"Perhaps we've been going about this the wrong way. I was listening to you and Jacob just now, and when you were speaking of what the… fetus wants, Jacob had an interesting thought."

Me? What had I thought? Besides my obvious hatred for the thing? At least I wasn't alone in that. I could tell that Edward had a difficult time using a term as mild as fetus.

"We haven't actually addressed that angle," Edward went on. "We've been trying to get Bella what she needs. And her body is accepting it about as well as one of ours would. Perhaps we should address the needs of the… fetus first. Maybe if we can satisfy it, we'll be able to help her more effectively."

"I'm not following you, Edward," Carlisle said.

"Think about it, Carlisle. If that creature is more vampire than human, can't you guess what it craves—what it's not getting? Jacob did."

I did? I ran through the conversation, trying to remember what thoughts I'd kept to myself. I remembered at the same time that Carlisle understood.

"Oh," he said in a surprised tone. "You think it is… thirsty?"

Rosalie hissed under her breath. She wasn't suspicious anymore. Her revoltingly perfect face was all lit up, her eyes wide with excitement. "Of course," she muttered. "Carlisle, we have all that type O negative laid aside for Bella. It's a good idea," she added, not looking at me.

"Hmm." Carlisle put his hand to his chin, lost in thought. "I wonder… And then, what would be the best way to administer. . . ."

Rosalie shook her head. "We don't have time to be creative. I'd say we should start with the traditional way."

"Wait a minute," I whispered. "Just hold on. Are you—are you talking about making Bella drink blood?"

"It was your idea, dog," Rosalie said, scowling at me without ever quite looking at me. I ignored her and watched Carlisle. That same ghost of hope that had been in Edward's face was now in the doctor's eyes. He pursed his lips, speculating.

"That's just . . ." I couldn't find the right word.

"Monstrous?" Edward suggested. "Repulsive?"

"Pretty much."

"But what if it helps her?" he whispered.

I shook my head angrily. "What are you gonna do, shove a tube down her throat?"

"I plan to ask her what she thinks. I just wanted to run it past Carlisle first."

Rosalie nodded. "If you tell her it might help the baby, she'll be willing to do anything. Even if we do have to feed them through a tube."

I realized then—when I heard how her voice got all loveydovey as she said the word baby—that Blondie would be in line with anything that helped the little life-sucking monster. Was that what was going on, the mystery factor that was bonding the two of them? Was Rosalie after the kid?

From the corner of my eye, I saw Edward nod once, absently, not looking in my direction. But I knew he was answering my questions.

Huh. I wouldn't have thought the ice-cold Barbie would have a maternal side. So much for protecting Bella—Rosalie'd probably jam the tube down Bella's throat herself. Edward's mouth mashed into a hard line, and I knew I was right again.

"Well, we don't have time to sit around discussing this," Rosalie said impatiently.

"What do you think, Carlisle? Can we try?"

Carlisle took a deep breath, and then he was on his feet. "We'll ask Bella."

Blondie smiled smugly—sure that, if it was up to Bella, she would get her way. I dragged myself up from the stairs and followed after them as they disappeared into the house. I wasn't sure why. Just morbid curiosity, maybe. It was like a horror movie. Monsters and blood all over the place.

Maybe I just couldn't resist another hit of my dwindling drug supply. Bella lay flat on the hospital bed, her belly a mountain under the sheet. She looked like wax—colorless and sort of see-through. You'd think she was already dead, except for the tiny movement of her chest, her shallow breathing. And then her eyes, following the four of us with exhausted suspicion.

The others were at her side already, flitting across the room with sudden darting motions. It was creepy to watch. I ambled along at a slow walk.

“What’s going on?” Bella demanded in a scratchy whisper. Her waxy hand twitched up

—like she was trying to protect her balloon-shaped stomach.

“Jacob had an idea that might help you,” Carlisle said. I wished he would leave me out of it. I hadn’t suggested anything. Give the credit to her bloodsucking husband, where it belonged. “It won’t be… pleasant, but—”

“But it will help the baby,” Rosalie interrupted eagerly. “We’ve thought of a better way to feed him. Maybe.”

Bella’s eyelids fluttered. Then she coughed out a weak chuckle. “Not pleasant?” she whispered. “Gosh, that’ll be such a change.” She eyed the tube stuck into her arm and coughed again.

Blondie laughed with her.

The girl looked like she only had hours left, and she had to be in pain, but she was making jokes. So Bella. Trying to ease the tension, make it better for everyone else. Edward stepped around Rosalie, no humor touching his intense expression. I was glad for that. It helped, just a little bit, that he was suffering worse than me. He took her hand, not the one that was still protecting her swollen belly.

“Bella, love, we’re going to ask you to do something monstrous,” he said, using the same adjectives he’d offered me. “Repulsive.”

Well, at least he was giving it to her straight.

She took a shallow, fluttery breath. “How bad?”

Carlisle answered. “We think the fetus might have an appetite closer to ours than to yours. We think it’s thirsty.”

She blinked. “Oh. Oh.”

“Your condition—both of your conditions—are deteriorating rapidly. We don’t have time to waste, to come up with more palatable ways to do this. The fastest way to test the theory—”

“I’ve got to drink it,” she whispered. She nodded slightly—barely enough energy for a little head bob. “I can do that. Practice for the future, right?” Her colorless lips stretched into a faint grin as she looked at Edward. He didn’t smile back. Rosalie started tapping her toe impatiently. The sound was really irritating. I wondered what she would do if I threw her through a wall right now.

“So, who’s going to catch me a grizzly bear?” Bella whispered.

Carlisle and Edward exchanged a quick glance. Rosalie stopped tapping.

“What?” Bella asked.

"It will be a more effective test if we don't cut corners, Bella," Carlisle said.

"If the fetus is craving blood," Edward explained, "it's not craving animal blood."

"It won't make a difference to you, Bella. Don't think about it," Rosalie encouraged. Bella's eyes widened. "Who?" she breathed, and her gaze flickered to me.

"I'm not here as a donor, Bells," I grumbled. "'Sides, it's human blood that thing's after, and I don't think mine applies—"

"We have blood on hand," Rosalie told her, talking over me before I'd finished, like I wasn't there. "For you—just in case. Don't worry about anything at all. It's going to be fine. I have a good feeling about this, Bella. I think the baby will be so much better."

Bella's hand ran across her stomach.

"Well," she rasped, barely audible. "I'm starving, so I'll bet he is, too." Trying to make another joke. "Let's go for it. My first vampire act."

# Chapter 13

## GOOD THING I'VE GOT A STRONG STOMACH

Carlisle and Rosalie were off in a flash, darting upstairs. I could hear them debating whether they should warm it up for her. Ugh. I wondered what all house-of-horrors stuff they kept around here. Fridge full of blood, check. What else? Torture chamber? Coffin room?

Edward stayed, holding Bella's hand. His face was dead again. He didn't seem to have the energy to keep up even that little hint of hope he'd had before. They stared into each other's eyes, but not in a gooey way. It was like they were having a conversation. Kind of reminded me of Sam and Emily.

No, it wasn't gooey, but that only made it harder to watch.

I knew what it was like for Leah, having to see that all the time. Having to hear it in Sam's head. Of course we all felt bad for her, we weren't monsters—in that sense, anyway. But I guess we'd blamed her for how she handled it. Lashing out at everyone, trying to make us all as miserable as she was.

I would never blame her again. How could anyone help spreading this kind of misery around? How could anyone not try to ease some of the burden by shoving a little piece of it off on someone else?

And if it meant that I had to have a pack, how could I blame her for taking my freedom?

I would do the same. If there was a way to escape this pain, I'd take it, too. Rosalie darted downstairs after a second, flying through the room like a sharp breeze, stirring up the burning smell. She stopped inside the kitchen, and I heard the creak of a cupboard door.

"Not clear, Rosalie," Edward murmured. He rolled his eyes. Bella looked curious, but Edward just shook his head at her.

Rosalie blew back through the room and disappeared again.

"This was your idea?" Bella whispered, her voice rough as she strained to make it loud enough for me to hear. Forgetting that I could hear just fine. I kind of liked how, a lot of the time, she seemed to forget that I wasn't completely human. I moved closer, so that she wouldn't have to work so hard.

"Don't blame me for this one. Your vampire was just picking snide comments out of my head."

She smiled a little. "I didn't expect to see you again."

"Yeah, me, either," I said.

It felt weird just standing here, but the vampires had shoved all the furniture out of the way for the medical setup. I imagined that it didn't bother them—sitting or standing didn't make much difference when you were stone. Wouldn't bother me much, either, except that I was so exhausted.

"Edward told me what you had to do. I'm sorry."

"S'okay. It was probably only a matter of time till I snapped over something Sam wanted me to do," I lied.

"And Seth," she whispered.

"He's actually happy to help."

"I hate causing you trouble."

I laughed once—more a bark than a laugh.

She breathed a faint sigh. "I guess that's nothing new, is it?"

"No, not really."

"You don't have to stay and watch this," she said, barely mouthing the words. I could leave. It was probably a good idea. But if I did, with the way she looked right now, I could be missing the last fifteen minutes of her life.

"I don't really have anywhere else to go," I told her, trying to keep the emotion out of my voice. "The wolf thing is a lot less appealing since Leah joined up."

"Leah?" she gasped.

"You didn't tell her?" I asked Edward.

He just shrugged without moving his eyes from her face. I could see it wasn't very exciting news to him, not something worth sharing with the more important events that were going down.

Bella didn't take it so lightly. It looked like it was bad news to her.

"Why?" she breathed.

I didn't want to get into the whole novel-length version. "To keep an eye on Seth."

"But Leah hates us," she whispered.

Us. Nice. I could see that she was afraid, though.

"Leah's not going to bug anyone." But me. "She's in my pack"—I grimaced at the words—"so she follows my lead." Ugh.

Bella didn't look convinced.

"You're scared of Leah, but you're best buds with the psychopath blonde?"

There was a low hiss from the second floor. Cool, she'd heard me. Bella frowned at me. "Don't. Rose... understands."

"Yeah," I grunted. "She understands that you're gonna die and she doesn't care, s'long as she gets her mutant spawn out of the deal."

"Stop being a jerk, Jacob," she whispered.

She looked too weak to get mad at. I tried to smile instead. "You say that like it's possible."

Bella tried not to smile back for a second, but she couldn't help it in the end; her chalky lips pulled up at the corners.

And then Carlisle and the psycho in question were there. Carlisle had a white plastic cup in his hand—the kind with a lid and a bendy straw. Oh— not clear; now I got it. Edward didn't want Bella to have to think about what she was doing any more than necessary.

You couldn't see what was in the cup at all. But I could smell it. Carlisle hesitated, the hand with the cup half-extended. Bella eyed it, looking scared again.

"We could try another method," Carlisle said quietly.

"No," Bella whispered. "No, I'll try this first. We don't have time. . . ."

At first I thought she'd finally gotten a clue and was worried about herself, but then her hand fluttered feebly against her stomach.

Bella reached out and took the cup from him. Her hand shook a little, and I could hear the sloshing from inside. She tried to prop herself up on one elbow, but she could barely lift her head. A whisper of heat brushed down my spine as I saw how frail she'd gotten in less than a day.

Rosalie put her arm under Bella's shoulders, supporting her head, too, like you did with a newborn. Blondie was all about the babies.

"Thanks," Bella whispered. Her eyes flickered around at us. Still aware enough to feel self-conscious. If she wasn't so drained, I'd bet she'd've blushed.

"Don't mind them," Rosalie murmured.

It made me feel awkward. I should've left when Bella'd offered the chance. I didn't belong here, being part of this. I thought about ducking out, but then I realized a move like that would only make this worse for Bella—make it harder for her to go through with it. She'd figure I was too disgusted to stay. Which was almost true. Still. While I wasn't going to claim

responsibility for this idea, I didn't want to jinx it, either.

Bella lifted the cup to her face and sniffed at the end of the straw. She flinched, and then made a face.

"Bella, sweetheart, we can find an easier way," Edward said, holding his hand out for the cup.

"Plug your nose," Rosalie suggested. She glared at Edward's hand like she might take a snap at it. I wished she would. I bet Edward wouldn't take that sitting down, and I'd love to see Blondie lose a limb.

"No, that's not it. It's just that it—" Bella sucked in a deep breath. "It smells good," she admitted in a tiny voice.

I swallowed hard, fighting to keep the disgust off my face.

"That's a good thing," Rosalie told Bella eagerly. "That means we're on the right track. Give it a try." Given Blondie's new expression, I was surprised she didn't break into a touchdown dance.

Bella shoved the straw between her lips, squeezed her eyes shut, and wrinkled her nose. I could hear the blood slopping around in the cup again as her hand shook. She sipped at it for a second, and then moaned quietly with her eyes still closed. Edward and I stepped forward at the same time. He touched her face. I clenched my hands behind my back.

"Bella, love—"

"I'm okay," she whispered. She opened her eyes and stared up at him. Her expression was... apologetic. Pleading. Scared. "It tastes good, too."

Acid churned in my stomach, threatening to overflow. I ground my teeth together.

"That's good," Blondie repeated, still jazzed. "A good sign."

Edward just pressed his hand to her cheek, curling his fingers around the shape of her fragile bones.

Bella sighed and put her lips to the straw again. She took a real pull this time. The action wasn't as weak as everything else about her. Like some instinct was taking over.

"How's your stomach? Do you feel nauseated?" Carlisle asked.

Bella shook her head. "No, I don't feel sick," she whispered. "There's a first, eh?"

Rosalie beamed. "Excellent."

"I think it's a bit early for that, Rose," Carlisle murmured.

Bella gulped another mouthful of blood. Then she flashed a look at Edward. "Does this screw my total?" she whispered. "Or do we start counting after I'm a vampire?"

"No one is counting, Bella. In any case, no one died for this." He smiled a lifeless smile.

"Your record is still clean."

They'd lost me.

"I'll explain later," Edward said, so low the words were just a breath.

"What?" Bella whispered.

"Just talking to myself," he lied smoothly.

If he succeeded with this, if Bella lived, Edward wasn't going to be able to get away with so much when her senses were as sharp as his. He'd have to work on the honesty thing.

Edward's lips twitched, fighting a smile.

Bella chugged a few more ounces, staring past us toward the window. Probably pretending we weren't here. Or maybe just me. No one else in this group would be disgusted by what she was doing. Just the opposite—they were probably having a tough time not ripping the cup away from her.

Edward rolled his eyes.

Jeez, how did anyone stand living with him? It was really too bad he couldn't hear Bella's thoughts. Then he'd annoy the crap out of her, too, and she'd get tired of him. Edward chuckled once. Bella's eyes flicked to him immediately, and she half-smiled at the humor in his face. I would guess that wasn't something she'd seen in a while.

"Something funny?" she breathed.

"Jacob," he answered.

She looked over with another weary smile for me. “Jake’s a crack-up,” she agreed. Great, now I was the court jester. “Bada bing,” I mumbled in weak rim-shot impression. She smiled again, and then took another swig from the cup. I flinched when the straw pulled at empty air, making a loud sucking sound.

“I did it,” she said, sounding pleased. Her voice was clearer—rough, but not a whisper for the first time today. “If I keep this down, Carlisle, will you take the needles out of me?”

“As soon as possible,” he promised. “Honestly, they aren’t doing that much good where they are.”

Rosalie patted Bella’s forehead, and they exchanged a hopeful glance. And anyone could see it—the cup full of human blood had made an immediate difference. Her color was returning—there was a tiny hint of pink in her waxy cheeks. Already she didn’t seem to need Rosalie’s support so much anymore. Her breathing was easier, and I would swear her heartbeat was stronger, more even. Everything accelerated.

That ghost of hope in Edward’s eyes had turned into the real thing.

“Would you like more?” Rosalie pressed.

Bella’s shoulders slumped.

Edward flashed a glare at Rosalie before he spoke to Bella. “You don’t have to drink more right away.”

“Yeah, I know. But… I want to,” she admitted glumly.

Rosalie pulled her thin, sharp fingers through Bella's lank hair. "You don't need to be embarrassed about that, Bella. Your body has cravings. We all understand that." Her tone was soothing at first, but then she added harshly, "Anyone who doesn't understand shouldn't be here."

Meant for me, obviously, but I wasn't going to let Blondie get to me. I was glad Bella felt better. So what if the means grossed me out? It wasn't like I'd said anything. Carlisle took the cup from Bella's hand. "I'll be right back."

Bella stared at me while he disappeared.

"Jake, you look awful," she croaked.

"Look who's talking."

"Seriously—when's the last time you slept?"

I thought about that for a second. "Huh. I'm not actually sure."

"Aw, Jake. Now I'm messing with your health, too. Don't be stupid."

I gritted my teeth. She was allowed to kill herself for a monster, but I wasn't allowed to miss a few nights' sleep to watch her do it?

"Get some rest, please," she went on. "There're a few beds upstairs—you're welcome to any of them."

The look on Rosalie's face made it clear that I wasn't welcome to one of them. It made me wonder what

Sleepless Beauty needed a bed for anyway. Was she that possessive of her props?

"Thanks, Bells, but I'd rather sleep on the ground. Away from the stench, you know."

She grimaced. "Right."

Carlisle was back then, and Bella reached out for the blood, absentminded, like she was thinking of something else. With the same distracted expression, she started sucking it down.

She really was looking better. She pulled herself forward, being careful of the tubes, and scooted into a sitting position. Rosalie hovered, her hands ready to catch Bella if she sagged. But Bella didn't need her. Taking deep breaths in between swallows, Bella finished the second cup quickly.

"How do you feel now?" Carlisle asked.

"Not sick. Sort of hungry… only I'm not sure if I'm hungry or thirsty, you know?"

"Carlisle, just look at her," Rosalie murmured, so smug she should have canary feathers on her lips. "This is obviously what her body wants. She should drink more."

"She's still human, Rosalie. She needs food, too. Let's give her a little while to see how this affects her, and then maybe we can try some food again. Does anything sound particularly good to you, Bella?"

"Eggs," she said immediately, and then she exchanged a look and a smile with Edward. His smile

was brittle, but there was more life on his face than before. I blinked then, and almost forgot how to open my eyes again.

“Jacob,” Edward murmured. “You really should sleep. As Bella said, you’re certainly welcome to the accommodations here, though you’d probably be more comfortable outside. Don’t worry about anything—I promise I’ll find you if there’s a need.”

“Sure, sure,” I mumbled. Now that it appeared Bella had a few more hours, I could escape. Go curl up under a tree somewhere.... Far enough away that the smell couldn’t reach me. The bloodsucker would wake me up if something went wrong. He owed me.

“I do,” Edward agreed.

I nodded and then put my hand on Bella’s. Hers was icy cold.

“Feel better,” I said.

“Thanks, Jacob.” She turned her hand over and squeezed mine. I felt the thin band of her wedding ring riding loose on her skinny finger.

“Get her a blanket or something,” I muttered as I turned for the door. Before I made it, two howls pierced the still morning air. There was no mistaking the urgency of the tone. No misunderstanding this time.

“Dammit,” I snarled, and I threw myself through the door. I hurled my body off the porch, letting the fire rip me apart midair. There was a sharp tearing sound as my shorts shredded. Crap. Those were the only

clothes I had. Didn't matter now. I landed on paws and took off toward the west.

What is it? I shouted in my head.

Incoming, Seth answered. At least three.

Did they split up?

I'm running the line back to Seth at the speed of light, Leah promised. I could feel the air huffing through her lungs as she pushed herself to an incredible velocity. The forest whipped around her. So far, no other point of attack.

Seth, do not challenge them. Wait for me.

They're slowing. Ugh—it's so off not being able to hear them. I think…

What?

I think they've stopped.

Waiting for the rest of the pack?

Shh. Feel that?

I absorbed his impressions. The faint, soundless shimmer in the air. Someone's phasing?

Feels like it, Seth agreed.

Leah flew into the small open space where Seth waited. She raked her claws into the dirt, spinning out like a race car.

Got your back, bro.

They're coming, Seth said nervously. Slow. Walking. Almost there, I told them. I tried to fly like Leah. It felt horrible being separated from Seth and Leah with potential danger closer to their end than mine. Wrong. I should be with them, between them and whatever was coming.

Look who's getting all paternal, Leah thought wryly.

Head in the game, Leah.

Four, Seth decided. Kid had good ears. Three wolves, one man. I made the little clearing then, moving immediately to the point. Seth sighed with relief and then straightened up, already in place at my right shoulder. Leah fell in on my left with a little less enthusiasm.

So now I rank under Seth, she grumbled to herself.

First come, first served, Seth thought smugly. 'Sides, you were never an Alpha's Third before. Still an upgrade.

Under my baby brother is not an upgrade.

Shh! I complained. I don't care where you stand. Shut up and get ready. They came into view a few seconds later, walking, as Seth had thought. Jared in the front, human, hands up. Paul and Quil and Collin on four legs behind him. There was no aggression in their postures. They hung back behind Jared, ears up, alert but calm. But… it was weird that Sam would send Collin rather than Embry. That wasn't what I would do if I were sending a diplomacy party into

enemy territory. I wouldn't send a kid. I'd send the experienced fighter.

A diversion? Leah thought.

Were Sam, Embry, and Brady making a move alone? That didn't seem likely. Want me to check? I can run the line and be back in two minutes. Should I warn the Cullens? Seth wondered.

What if the point was to divide us? I asked. The Cullens know something's up. They're ready.

Sam wouldn't be so stupid…, Leah whispered, fear jagged in her mind. She was imagining Sam attacking the Cullens with only the two others beside him. No, he wouldn't, I assured her, though I felt a little sick at the image in her head, too. All the while, Jared and the three wolves stared at us, waiting. It was eerie not to hear what Quil and Paul and Collin were saying to one another. Their expressions were blank

—unreadable.

Jared cleared his throat, and then he nodded to me. "White flag of truce, Jake. We're here to talk."

Think it's true? Seth asked.

Makes sense, but…

Yeah, Leah agreed. But.

We didn't relax.

Jared frowned. "It would be easier to talk if I could hear you, too."

I stared him down. I wasn't going to phase back until I felt better about this situation. Until it made sense. Why Collin? That was the part that had me most worried.

"Okay. I guess I'll just talk, then," Jared said. "Jake, we want you to come back."

Quil let out a soft whine behind him. Seconding the statement.

"You've torn our family apart. It's not meant to be this way."

I wasn't exactly in disagreement with that, but it was hardly the point. There were a few unresolved differences of opinion between me and Sam at the moment.

"We know that you feel… strongly about the situation with the Cullens. We know that's a problem. But this is an overreaction."

Seth growled. Overreaction? And attacking our allies without warning isn't ?

Seth, you ever heard of a poker face? Cool it.

Sorry.

Jared's eyes flickered to Seth and back to me. "Sam is willing to take this slowly, Jacob. He's calmed down, talked to the other Elders. They've decided that immediate action is in no one's best interest at this point."

Translation: They've already lost the element of surprise, Leah thought. It was weird how distinct our joint thinking was. The pack was already Sam's pack, was already "them" to us. Something outside and other. It was especially weird to have Leah thinking that way—to have her be a solid part of the "us."

"Billy and Sue agree with you, Jacob, that we can wait for Bella… to be separated from the problem. Killing her is not something any of us feel comfortable with."

Though I'd just given Seth crap for it, I couldn't hold back a small snarl of my own. So they didn't quite feel comfortable with murder, huh?

Jared raised his hands again. "Easy, Jake. You know what I mean. The point is, we're going to wait and reassess the situation. Decide later if there's a problem with the…

thing."

Ha, Leah thought. What a load.

You don't buy it?

I know what they're thinking, Jake. What Sam's thinking. They're betting on Bella dying anyway. And then they figure you'll be so mad…

That I'll lead the attack myself. My ears pressed against my skull. What Leah was guessing sounded pretty spot-on. And very possible, too. When… if that thing killed Bella, it was going to be easy to forget how I felt about Carlisle's family right now. They

would probably look like enemies—like no more than bloodsucking leeches—to me all over again.

I'll remind you, Seth whispered.

I know you will, kid. Question is whether I'll listen to you.

"Jake?" Jared asked.

I huffed a sigh.

Leah, make a circuit—just to be sure. I'm going to have to talk to him, and I want to be positive there isn't anything else going on while I'm phased. Give me a break, Jacob. You can phase in front of me. Despite my best efforts, I've seen you naked before—doesn't do much for me, so no worries.

I'm not trying to protect the innocence of your eyes, I'm trying to protect our backs. Get out of here.

Leah snorted once and then launched herself into the forest. I could hear her claws cutting into the soil, pushing her faster.

Nudity was an inconvenient but unavoidable part of pack life. We'd all thought nothing of it before Leah came along. Then it got awkward. Leah had average control when it came to her temper—it took her the usual length of time to stop exploding out of her clothes every time she got pissed. We'd all caught a glimpse. And it wasn't like she wasn't worth looking at; it was just that it was so not worth it when she caught you thinking about it later.

Jared and the others were staring at the place where she'd disappeared into the brush with wary expressions.

"Where's she going?" Jared asked.

I ignored him, closing my eyes and pulling myself together again. It felt like the air was trembling around me, shaking out from me in small waves. I lifted myself up on my hind legs, catching the moment just right so that I was fully upright as I shimmered down into my human self.

"Oh," Jared said. "Hey, Jake."

"Hey, Jared."

"Thanks for talking to me."

"Yeah."

"We want you to come back, man."

Quil whined again.

"I don't know if it's that easy, Jared."

"Come home," he said, leaning forward. Pleading. "We can sort this out. You don't belong here. Let Seth and Leah come home, too."

I laughed. "Right. Like I haven't been begging them to do that from hour one."

Seth snorted behind me.

Jared assessed that, his eyes cautious again. "So, what now, then?"

I thought that over for a minute while he waited.

“I don’t know. But I’m not sure things could just go back to normal anyway, Jared. I don’t know how it works—it doesn’t feel like I can just turn this Alpha thing off and on as the mood strikes. It feels sort of permanent.”

“You still belong with us.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Two Alphas can’t belong in the same place, Jared. Remember how close it got last night? The instinct is too competitive.”

“So are you all just going to hang out with the parasites for the rest of your lives?” he demanded. “You don’t have a home here. You’re already out of clothes,” he pointed out.

“You gonna stay wolf all the time? You know Leah doesn’t like eating that way.”

“Leah can do whatever she wants when she gets hungry. She’s here by her own choice. I’m not telling anyone what to do.”

Jared sighed. “Sam is sorry about what he did to you.”

I nodded. “I’m not angry anymore.”

“But?”

“But I’m not coming back, not now. We’re going to wait and see how it plays out, too. And we’re going to watch out for the Cullens for as long as that seems necessary. Because, despite what you think, this isn’t

just about Bella. We're protecting those who should be protected. And that applies to the Cullens, too." At least a fair number of them, anyway.

Seth yelped softly in agreement.

Jared frowned. "I guess there's nothing I can say to you, then."

"Not now. We'll see how things go."

Jared turned to face Seth, concentrating on him now, separate from me. "Sue asked me to tell you—no, to beg you—to come home. She's brokenhearted, Seth. All alone. I don't know how you and Leah can do this to her. Abandon her this way, when your dad just barely died—"

Seth whimpered.

"Ease up, Jared," I warned.

"Just letting him know how it is."

I snorted. "Right." Sue was tougher than anyone I knew. Tougher than my dad, tougher than me. Tough enough to play on her kids' sympathies if that's what it took to get them home. But it wasn't fair to work Seth that way. "Sue's known about this for how many hours now? And most of that time spent with Billy and Old Quil and Sam? Yeah, I'm sure she's just perishing of loneliness. 'Course you're free to go if you want, Seth. You know that."

Seth sniffed.

Then, a second later, he cocked an ear to the north. Leah must be close. Jeez, she was fast. Two beats, and Leah skidded to a stop in the brush a few yards away. She trotted in, taking the point in front of Seth. She kept her nose in the air, very obviously not looking in my direction.

I appreciated that.

"Leah?" Jared asked.

She met his gaze, her muzzle pulling back a little over her teeth. Jared didn't seem surprised by her hostility. "Leah, you know you don't want to be here."

She snarled at him. I gave her a warning glance she didn't see. Seth whined and nudged her with his shoulder.

"Sorry," Jared said. "Guess I shouldn't assume. But you don't have any ties to the bloodsuckers."

Leah very deliberately looked at her brother and then at me.

"So you want to watch out for Seth, I get that," Jared said. His eyes touched my face and then went back to hers. Probably wondering about that second look—just like I was. "But Jake's not going to let anything happen to him, and he's not afraid to be here." Jared made a face. "Anyway, please, Leah. We want you back. Sam wants you back."

Leah's tail twitched.

“Sam told me to beg. He told me to literally get down on my knees if I have to. He wants you home, Lee-lee, where you belong.”

I saw Leah flinch when Jared used Sam’s old nickname for her. And then, when he added those last three words, her hackles rose and she was yowling a long stream of snarls through her teeth. I didn’t have to be in her head to hear the cussing-out she was giving him, and neither did he. You could almost hear the exact words she was using. I waited till she was done. “I’m going to go out on a limb here and say that Leah belongs wherever she wants to be.”

Leah growled, but, as she was glaring at Jared, I figured it was in agreement.

“Look, Jared, we’re still family, okay? We’ll get past the feud, but, until we do, you probably ought to stick to your land. Just so there aren’t misunderstandings. Nobody wants a family brawl, right? Sam doesn’t want that, either, does he?”

“Of course, not,” Jared snapped. “We’ll stick to our land. But where is your land, Jacob?

Is it vampire land?”

“No, Jared. Homeless at the moment. But don’t worry—this isn’t going to last forever.”

I had to take a breath. “There’s not that much time… left. Okay? Then the Cullens will probably go, and Seth and Leah will come home.”

Leah and Seth whined together, their noses turning my direction in synchronization.

"And what about you, Jake?"

"Back to the forest, I think. I can't really stick around La Push. Two Alphas means too much tension. 'Sides, I was headed that way anyway. Before this mess."

"What if we need to talk?" Jared asked.

"Howl—but watch the line, 'kay? We'll come to you. And Sam doesn't need to send so many. We aren't looking for a fight."

Jared scowled, but nodded. He didn't like me setting conditions for Sam. "See you around, Jake. Or not." He waved halfheartedly.

"Wait, Jared. Is Embry okay?"

Surprise crossed his face. "Embry? Sure, he's fine. Why?"

"Just wondering why Sam sent Collin."

I watched his reaction, still suspicious that something was going on. I saw knowledge flash in his eyes, but it didn't look like the kind I was expecting.

"That's not really your business anymore, Jake."

"Guess not. Just curious."

I saw a twitch from the corner of my eye, but I didn't acknowledge it, because I didn't want to give Quil away. He was reacting to the subject.

"I'll let Sam know about your… instructions. Goodbye, Jacob."

I sighed. “Yeah. Bye, Jared. Hey, tell my dad that I’m okay, will you? And that I’m sorry, and that I love him.”

“I’ll pass that along.”

“Thanks.”

“C’mon, guys,” Jared said. He turned away from us, heading out of sight to phase because Leah was here. Paul and Collin were right on his heels, but Quil hesitated. He yelped softly, and I took a step toward him.

“Yeah, I miss you, too, bro.”

Quil jogged over to me, his head hanging down morosely. I patted his shoulder.

“It’ll be okay.”

He whined.

“Tell Embry I miss having you two on my flanks.”

He nodded and then pressed his nose to my forehead. Leah snorted. Quil looked up, but not at her. He looked back over his shoulder at where the others had gone.

“Yeah, go home,” I told him.

Quil yelped again and then took off after the others. I’d bet Jared wasn’t waiting superpatiently. As soon as he was gone, I pulled the warmth from the center of my body and let it surge through my limbs. In a flash of heat, I was on four legs again. Thought you

were going to make out with him, Leah snickered. I ignored her.

Was that okay? I asked them. It worried me, speaking for them that way, when I couldn't hear exactly what they were thinking. I didn't want to assume anything. I didn't want to be like Jared that way. Did I say anything you didn't want me to? Did I not say something I should have?

You did great, Jake! Seth encouraged.

You could have hit Jared, Leah thought. I wouldn't have minded that. I guess we know why Embry wasn't allowed to come, Seth thought. I didn't understand. Not allowed?

Jake, didya see Quil? He's pretty torn up, right? I'd put ten to one that Embry's even more upset. And Embry doesn't have a Claire. There's no way Quil can just pick up and walk away from La Push. Embry might. So Sam's not going to take any chances on him getting convinced to jump ship. He doesn't want our pack any bigger than it is now. Really? You think? I doubt Embry would mind shredding some Cullens. But he's your best friend, Jake. He and Quil would rather stand behind you than face you in a fight.

Well, I'm glad Sam kept him home, then. This pack is big enough. I sighed. Okay, then. So we're good, for now. Seth, you mind keeping an eye on things for a while? Leah and I both need to crash. This felt on the level, but who knows? Maybe it was a distraction. I wasn't always so paranoid, but I remembered the feel of Sam's commitment. The total one-track focus on

destroying the danger he saw. Would he take advantage of the fact that he could lie to us now?

No problem! Seth was only too eager to do whatever he could. You want me to explain to the Cullens? They're probably still kinda tense.

I got it. I want to check things out anyway.

They caught the whir of images from my fried brain.

Seth whimpered in surprise. Ew.

Leah whipped her head back and forth like she was trying to shake the image out of her mind. That is easily the freakin' grossest thing I've heard in my life. Yuck. If there was anything in my stomach, it would be coming back.

They are vampires, I guess, Seth allowed after a minute, compensating for Leah's reaction. I mean, it makes sense. And if it helps Bella, it's a good thing, right?

Both Leah and I stared at him.

What?

Mom dropped him a lot when he was a baby, Leah told me. On his head, apparently.

He used to gnaw on the crib bars, too.

Lead paint?

Looks like it, she thought.

Seth snorted. Funny. Why don't you two shut up and sleep?

# Chapter 14

## YOU KNOW THINGS ARE BAD WHEN YOU FEEL GUILTY FOR BEING RUDE TO VAMPIRES

When I got back to the house, there was no one waiting outside for my report. Still on alert?

Everything's cool, I thought tiredly.

My eyes quickly caught a small change in the now-familiar scene. There was a stack of light-colored fabric on the bottom step of the porch. I loped over to investigate. Holding my breath, because the vampire smell stuck to the fabric like you wouldn't believe, I nudged the stack with my nose.

Someone had laid out clothes. Huh. Edward must have caught my moment of irritation as I'd bolted out the door. Well. That was… nice. And weird.

I took the clothes gingerly between my teeth—ugh—and carried them back to the trees. Just in case this was some joke by the blond psychopath and I had a bunch of girls' stuff here. Bet she'd love to see the look on my human face as I stood there naked, holding a sundress.

In the cover of the trees, I dropped the stinking pile and shifted back to human. I shook the clothes out, snapping them against a tree to beat some of the smell from them. They were definitely guy's clothes—tan pants and a white button-down shirt. Neither of them long enough, but they looked like they'd fit around me. Must be Emmett's. I rolled the cuffs up

on the shirtsleeves, but there wasn't much I could do about the pants. Oh well. I had to admit, I felt better with some clothes to my name, even stinky ones that didn't quite fit. It was hard not being able to just jet back home and grab another pair of old sweatpants when I needed them. The homeless thing again—not having anyplace to go back to. No possessions, either, which wasn't bothering me too bad now, but would probably get annoying soon.

Exhausted, I walked slowly up the Cullens' porch steps in my fancy new secondhand clothes but hesitated when I got to the door. Did I knock? Stupid, when they knew I was here. I wondered why no one acknowledged that—told me either to come in or get lost. Whatever. I shrugged and let myself in.

More changes. The room had shifted back to normal—almost—in the last twenty minutes. The big flat-screen was on, low volume, showing some chick flick that no one seemed to be watching. Carlisle and Esme stood by the back windows, which were open to the river again. Alice, Jasper, and Emmett were out of sight, but I heard them murmuring upstairs. Bella was on the couch like yesterday, with just one tube still hooked into her, and an IV hanging behind the back of the sofa. She was wrapped up like a burrito in a couple of thick quilts, so at least they'd listened to me before. Rosalie was cross-legged on the ground by her head. Edward sat at the other end of the couch with Bella's burrito'ed feet in his lap. He looked up when I came in and smiled at me—

just a little twitch of his mouth—like something pleased him.

Bella didn't hear me. She only glanced up when he did, and then she smiled, too. With real energy, her whole face lighting up. I couldn't remember the last time she'd looked so excited to see me.

What was with her? For crying out loud, she was married! Happily married, too—there was no question that she was in love with her vampire past the boundaries of sanity. And hugely pregnant, to top it off.

So why did she have to be so damn thrilled to see me? Like I'd made her whole freakin'

day by walking through the door.

If she would just not care… Or more than that—really not want me around. It would be so much easier to stay away.

Edward seemed to be in agreement with my thoughts—we were on the same wavelength so much lately it was crazy. He was frowning now, reading her face while she beamed at me.

"They just wanted to talk," I mumbled, my voice dragging with exhaustion. "No attack on the horizon."

"Yes," Edward answered. "I heard most of it."

That woke me up a little. We'd been a good three miles out. "How?"

"I'm hearing you more clearly—it's a matter of familiarity and concentration. Also, your thoughts are slightly easier to pick up when you're in your human form. So I caught most of what passed out there."

"Oh." It bugged me a little, but for no good reason, so I shrugged it off. "Good. I hate repeating myself."

"I'd tell you to go get some sleep," Bella said, "but my guess is that you're going to pass out on the floor in about six seconds, so there's probably no point."

It was amazing how much better she sounded, how much stronger she looked. I smelled fresh blood and saw that the cup was in her hands again. How much blood would it take to keep her going? At some point, would they start trotting in the neighbors?

I headed for the door, counting off the seconds for her as I walked. "One Mississippi…

two Mississippi . . ."

"Where's the flood, mutt?" Rosalie muttered.

"You know how you drown a blonde, Rosalie?" I asked without stopping or turning to look at her. "Glue a mirror to the bottom of a pool."

I heard Edward chuckle as I pulled the door shut. His mood seemed to improve in exact correlation to Bella's health.

"I've already heard that one," Rosalie called after me.

I trudged down the steps, my only goal to drag myself far enough into the trees that the air would be pure again. I planned to ditch the clothes a convenient distance from the house for future use rather than tying them to my leg, so I wouldn't be smelling them, either. As I fumbled with the buttons on the new

shirt, I thought randomly about how buttons would never be in style for werewolves.

I heard the voices while I slogged across the lawn.

“Where are you going?” Bella asked.

“There was something I forgot to say to him.”

“Let Jacob sleep—it can wait.”

Yes, please, let Jacob sleep.

“It will only take a moment.”

I turned slowly. Edward was already out the door. He had an apology in his expression as he approached me.

“Jeez, what now?”

“I’m sorry,” he said, and then he hesitated, like he didn’t know how to phrase what he was thinking.

What’s on your mind, mind reader?

“When you were speaking to Sam’s delegates earlier,” he murmured, “I was giving a play-by-play for Carlisle and Esme and the rest. They were concerned—”

“Look, we’re not dropping our guard. You don’t have to believe Sam like we do. We’re keeping our eyes open regardless.”

“No, no, Jacob. Not about that. We trust your judgment. Rather, Esme was troubled by the hardships this is putting your pack through. She asked me to speak to you privately about it.”

That took me off guard. “Hardships?”

“The homeless part, particularly. She’s very upset that you are all so… bereft.”

I snorted. Vampire mother hen—bizarre. “We’re tough. Tell her not to worry.”

“She’d still like to do what she can. I got the impression that Leah prefers not to eat in her wolf form?”

“And?” I demanded.

“Well, we do have normal human food here, Jacob. Keeping up appearances, and, of course, for Bella. Leah is welcome to anything she’d like. All of you are.”

“I’ll pass that along.”

“Leah hates us.”

“So?”

“So try to pass it along in such a way as to make her consider it, if you don’t mind.”

“I’ll do what I can.”

“And then there’s the matter of clothes.”

I glanced down at the ones I was wearing. “Oh yeah. Thanks.” It probably wouldn’t be good manners to mention how bad they reeked.

He smiled, just a little. “Well, we’re easily able to help out with any needs there. Alice rarely allows us to wear the same thing twice. We’ve got piles of brand-

new clothes that are destined for Goodwill, and I'd imagine that Leah is fairly close to Esme's size. . . ."

"Not sure how she'll feel about bloodsucker castoffs. She's not as practical as I am."

"I trust that you can present the offer in the best possible light. As well as the offer for any other physical object you might need, or transportation, or anything else at all. And showers, too, since you prefer to sleep outdoors. Please… don't consider yourselves without the benefits of a home."

He said the last line softly—not trying to keep quiet this time, but with some kind of real emotion.

I stared at him for a second, blinking sleepily. "That's, er, nice of you. Tell Esme we appreciate the, uh, thought. But the perimeter cuts through the river in a few places, so we stay pretty clean, thanks."

"If you would pass the offer on, regardless."

"Sure, sure."

"Thank you."

I turned away from him, only to stop cold when I heard the low, pained cry from inside the house. By the time I looked back, he was already gone.

What now?

I followed after him, shuffling like a zombie. Using about the same number of brain cells, too. It didn't feel like I had a choice. Something was wrong. I would

go see what it was. There would be nothing I could do. And I would feel worse. It seemed inevitable.

I let myself in again. Bella was panting, curled over the bulge in the center of her body. Rosalie held her while Edward, Carlisle, and Esme all hovered. A flicker of motion caught my eye; Alice was at the top of the stairs, staring down into the room with her hands pressed to her temples. It was weird—like she was barred from entering somehow.

"Give me a second, Carlisle," Bella panted.

"Bella," the doctor said anxiously, "I heard something crack. I need to take a look."

"Pretty sure"—pant—"it was a rib. Ow. Yep. Right here." She pointed to her left side, careful not to touch.

It was breaking her bones now.

"I need to take an X-ray. There might be splinters. We don't want it to puncture anything."

Bella took a deep breath. "Okay."

Rosalie lifted Bella carefully. Edward seemed like he was going to argue, but Rosalie bared her teeth at him and growled, "I've already got her."

So Bella was stronger now, but the thing was, too. You couldn't starve one without starving the other, and healing worked just the same. No way to win. Blondie carried Bella swiftly up the big staircase with Carlisle and Edward right on her heels, none of them taking any notice of me standing dumbstruck in the

doorway. So they had a blood bank and an X-ray machine? Guess the doc brought his work home with him.

I was too tired to follow them, too tired to move. I leaned back against the wall and then slid to the ground. The door was still open, and I pointed my nose toward it, grateful for the clean breeze blowing in. I leaned my head against the jamb and listened. I could hear the sound of the X-ray machinery upstairs. Or maybe I just assumed that's what it was. And then the lightest of footsteps coming down the stairs. I didn't look to see which vampire it was.

"Do you want a pillow?" Alice asked me.

"No," I mumbled. What was with the pushy hospitality? It was creeping me out.

"That doesn't look comfortable," she observed.

"S'not."

"Why don't you move, then?"

"Tired. Why aren't you upstairs with the rest of them?" I shot back.

"Headache," she answered.

I rolled my head around to look at her.

Alice was a tiny little thing. 'Bout the size of one of my arms. She looked even smaller now, sort of hunched in on herself. Her small face was pinched.

"Vampires get headaches?"

"Not the normal ones."

I snorted. Normal vampires.

"So how come you're never with Bella anymore?" I asked, making the question an accusation. It hadn't occurred to me before, because my head had been full of other crap, but it was weird that Alice was never around Bella, not since I'd been here. Maybe if Alice were by her side, Rosalie wouldn't be. "Thought you two were like this." I twisted two of my fingers together.

"Like I said"—she curled up on the tile a few feet from me, wrapping her skinny arms around her skinny knees—"headache."

"Bella's giving you a headache?"

"Yes."

I frowned. Pretty sure I was too tired for riddles. I let my head roll back around toward the fresh air and closed my eyes.

"Not Bella, really," she amended. "The… fetus."

Ah, someone else who felt like I did. It was pretty easy to recognize. She said the word grudgingly, the way Edward did.

"I can't see it," she told me, though she might have been talking to herself. For all she knew, I was already gone. "I can't see anything about it. Just like you."

I flinched, and then my teeth ground together. I didn't like being compared to the creature.

"Bella gets in the way. She's all wrapped around it, so she's… blurry. Like bad reception on a TV—like trying to focus your eyes on those fuzzy people jerking around on the screen. It's killing my head to watch her. And I can't see more than a few minutes ahead, anyway. The… fetus is too much a part of her future. When she first decided…

when she knew she wanted it, she blurred right out of my sight. Scared me to death."

She was quiet for a second, and then she added, "I have to admit, it's a relief having you close by—in spite of the wet-dog smell. Everything goes away. Like having my eyes closed. It numbs the headache."

"Happy to be of service, ma'am," I mumbled.

"I wonder what it has in common with you… why you're the same that way."

Sudden heat flashed in the center of my bones. I clenched my fists to hold off the tremors.

"I have nothing in common with that life-sucker," I said through my teeth.

"Well, there's something there."

I didn't answer. The heat was already burning away. I was too dead tired to stay furious.

"You don't mind if I sit here by you, do you?" she asked.

"Guess not. Stinks anyway."

"Thanks," she said. "This is the best thing for it, I guess, since I can't take aspirin."

"Could you keep it down? Sleeping, here."

She didn't respond, immediately lapsing into silence. I was out in seconds. I was dreaming that I was really thirsty. And there was a big glass of water in front of me—all cold, you could see the condensation running down the sides. I grabbed the cup and took a huge gulp, only to find out pretty quick that it wasn't water—it was straight bleach. I choked it back out, spewing it everywhere, and a bunch of it blew out of my nose. It burned. My nose was on fire....

The pain in my nose woke me up enough to remember where I'd fallen asleep. The smell was pretty fierce, considering that my nose wasn't actually inside the house. Ugh. And it was noisy. Someone was laughing too loud. A familiar laugh, but one that didn't go with the smell. Didn't belong.

I groaned and opened my eyes. The skies were dull gray—it was daytime, but no clue as to when. Maybe close to sunset—it was pretty dark.

"About time," Blondie mumbled from not too far away. "The chainsaw impersonation was getting a little tired."

I rolled over and wrenched myself into a sitting position. In the process, I figured out where the smell was coming from. Someone had stuffed a wide feather pillow under my face. Probably trying to be nice, I'd

guess. Unless it'd been Rosalie. Once my face was out of the stinking feathers, I caught other scents. Like bacon and cinnamon, all mixed up with the vampire smell.

I blinked, taking in the room.

Things hadn't changed too much, except that now Bella was sitting up in the middle of the sofa, and the IV was gone. Blondie sat at her feet, her head resting against Bella's knees. Still gave me chills to see how casually they touched her, though I guess that was pretty brain-dead, all things considered. Edward was on one side of her, holding her hand. Alice was on the floor, too, like Rosalie. Her face wasn't pinched up now. And it was easy to see why—she'd found another painkiller.

"Hey, Jake's coming around!" Seth crowed.

He was sitting on Bella's other side, his arm slung carelessly over her shoulders, an overflowing plate of food on his lap.

What the hell?

"He came to find you," Edward said while I got to my feet. "And Esme convinced him to stay for breakfast."

Seth took in my expression, and he hurried to explain. "Yeah, Jake—I was just checking to see if you were okay 'cause you didn't ever phase back. Leah got worried. I told her you probably just crashed human, but you know how she is. Anyway, they had all this food and, dang,"—he turned to Edward—"man, you can cook."

"Thank you," Edward murmured.

I inhaled slowly, trying to unclench my teeth. I couldn't take my eyes off Seth's arm.

"Bella got cold," Edward said quietly.

Right. None of my business, anyway. She didn't belong to me.

Seth heard Edward's comment, looked at my face, and suddenly he needed both hands to eat with. He took his arm off Bella and dug in. I walked over to stand a few feet from the couch, still trying to get my bearings.

"Leah running patrol?" I asked Seth. My voice was still thick with sleep.

"Yeah," he said as he chewed. Seth had new clothes on, too. They fit him better than mine fit me. "She's on it. No worries. She'll howl if there's anything. We traded off around midnight. I ran twelve hours." He was proud of that, and it showed in his tone.

"Midnight? Wait a minute—what time is it now?"

"'Bout dawn." He glanced toward the window, checking.

Well, damn. I'd slept through the rest of the day and the whole night—dropped the ball.

"Crap. Sorry about that, Seth. Really. You shoulda kicked me awake."

"Naw, man, you needed some serious sleep. You haven't taken a break since when?

Night before your last patrol for Sam? Like forty hours? Fifty? You're not a machine, Jake. 'Sides, you didn't miss anything at all."

Nothing at all? I glanced quickly at Bella. Her color was back to the way I remembered it. Pale, but with the rose undertone. Her lips were pink again. Even her hair looked better—shinier. She saw me appraising and gave me a grin.

"How's the rib?" I asked.

"Taped up nice and tight. I don't even feel it."

I rolled my eyes. I heard Edward grind his teeth together, and I figured her blow-it-off attitude bugged him as much at it bugged me.

"What's for breakfast?" I asked, a little sarcastic. "O negative or AB positive?"

She stuck her tongue out at me. Totally herself again. "Omelets," she said, but her eyes darted down, and I saw that her cup of blood was wedged between her leg and Edward's.

"Go get some breakfast, Jake," Seth said. "There's a bunch in the kitchen. You've got to be empty."

I examined the food in his lap. Looked like half a cheese omelet and the last fourth of a Frisbee-sized cinnamon roll. My stomach growled, but I ignored it.

"What's Leah having for breakfast?" I asked Seth critically.

"Hey, I took food to her before I ate anything," he defended himself. "She said she'd rather eat roadkill, but I bet she caves. These cinnamon rolls… " He seemed at a loss for words.

"I'll go hunt with her, then."

Seth sighed as I turned to leave.

"A moment, Jacob?"

It was Carlisle asking, so when I turned around again, my face was probably less disrespectful than it would have been if anyone else had stopped me.

"Yeah?"

Carlisle approached me while Esme drifted off toward the other room. He stopped a few feet away, just a little bit farther away than the normal space between two humans having a conversation. I appreciated him giving me my space.

"Speaking of hunting," he began in a somber tone. "That's going to be an issue for my family. I understand that our previous truce is inoperative at the moment, so I wanted your advice. Will Sam be hunting for us outside of the perimeter you've created? We don't want to take a chance with hurting any of your family—or losing any of ours. If you were in our shoes, how would you proceed?"

I leaned away, a little surprised, when he threw it back at me like that. What would I know about being in a bloodsucker's expensive shoes? But, then again, I did know Sam.

“It’s a risk,” I said, trying to ignore the other eyes I felt on me and to talk only to him.

“Sam’s calmed down some, but I’m pretty sure that in his head, the treaty is void. As long as he thinks the tribe, or any other human, is in real danger, he’s not going to ask questions first, if you know what I mean. But, with all that, his priority is going to be La Push. There really aren’t enough of them to keep a decent watch on the people while putting out hunting parties big enough to do much damage. I’d bet he’s keeping it close to home.”

Carlisle nodded thoughtfully.

“So I guess I’d say, go out together, just in case. And probably you should go in the day,

’cause we’d be expecting night. Traditional vampire stuff. You’re fast—go over the mountains and hunt far enough away that there’s no chance he’d send anyone that far from home.”

“And leave Bella behind, unprotected?”

I snorted. “What are we, chopped liver?”

Carlisle laughed, and then his face was serious again. “Jacob, you can’t fight against your brothers.”

My eyes tightened. “I’m not saying it wouldn’t be hard, but if they were really coming to kill her—I would be able to stop them.”

Carlisle shook his head, anxious. “No, I didn’t mean that you would be… incapable. But that it would be very wrong. I can’t have that on my conscience.”

"It wouldn't be on yours, Doc. It would be on mine. And I can take it."

"No, Jacob. We will make sure that our actions don't make that a necessity." He frowned thoughtfully "We'll go three at a time," he decided after a second. "That's probably the best we can do."

"I don't know, Doc. Dividing down the middle isn't the best strategy."

"We've got some extra abilities that will even it up. If Edward is one of the three, he'll be able to give us a few miles' radius of safety."

We both glanced at Edward. His expression had Carlisle backtracking quickly.

"I'm sure there are other ways, too," Carlisle said. Clearly, there was no physical need strong enough to get Edward away from Bella now. "Alice, I would imagine you could see which routes would be a mistake?"

"The ones that disappear," Alice said, nodding. "Easy."

Edward, who had gone all tense with Carlisle's first plan, loosened up. Bella was staring unhappily at Alice, that little crease between her eyes that she got when she was stressed out.

"Okay, then," I said. "That's settled. I'll just be on my way. Seth, I'll expect you back on at dusk, so get a nap in there somewhere, all right?"

"Sure, Jake. I'll phase back soon as I'm done. Unless . . ." he hesitated, looking at Bella.

"Do you need me?"

"She's got blankets," I snapped at him.

"I'm fine, Seth, thanks," Bella said quickly.

And then Esme flitted back in the room, a big covered dish in her hands. She stopped hesitantly just behind Carlisle's elbow, her wide, dark gold eyes on my face. She held the dish out and took a shy step closer.

"Jacob," she said quietly. Her voice wasn't quite so piercing as the others'. "I know it's… unappetizing to you, the idea of eating here, where it smells so unpleasant. But I would feel much better if you would take some food with you when you go. I know you can't go home, and that's because of us. Please—ease some of my remorse. Take something to eat." She held the food out to me, her face all soft and pleading. I don't know how she did it, because she didn't look older than her mid-twenties, and she was bone pale, too, but something about her expression suddenly reminded me of my mom. Jeez.

"Uh, sure, sure," I mumbled. "I guess. Maybe Leah's still hungry or something."

I reached out and took the food with one hand, holding it away, at arm's length. I'd go dump it under a tree or something. I didn't want her to feel bad. Then I remembered Edward.

*Don't you say anything to her! Let her think I ate it.*

I didn't look at him to see if he was in agreement. He'd better be in agreement. Bloodsucker owed me.

"Thank you, Jacob," Esme said, smiling at me. How did a stone face have dimples, for crying out loud?

"Um, thank you," I said. My face felt hot—hotter than usual.

This was the problem with hanging out with vampires—you got used to them. They started messing up the way you saw the world. They started feeling like friends.

"Will you come back later, Jake?" Bella asked as I tried to make a run for it.

"Uh, I don't know."

She pressed her lips together, like she was trying not to smile. "Please? I might get cold."

I inhaled deeply through my nose, and then realized, too late, that that was not a good idea. I winced. "Maybe."

"Jacob?" Esme asked. I backed toward the door as she continued; she took a few steps after me. "I left a basket of clothes on the porch. They're for Leah. They're freshly washed—I tried to touch them as little as possible." She frowned. "Do you mind taking them to her?"

"On it," I muttered, and then I ducked out the door before anyone could guilt me into anything else.

# Chapter 15

## TICK TOCK TICK TOCK TICK TOCK

Hey Jake, thought you said you wanted me at dusk. How come you didn't have Leah wake me up before she crashed?

'Cause I didn't need you. I'm still good.

He was already picking up the north half of the circle. Anything?

Nope. Nothing but nothing.

You did some scouting?

He'd caught the edge of one of my side trips. He headed up the new trail. Yeah—I ran a few spokes. You know, just checking. If the Cullens are going to make a hunting trip…

Good call.

Seth looped back toward the main perimeter.

It was easier to run with him than it was to do the same with Leah. Though she was trying—trying hard—there was always an edge to her thoughts. She didn't want to be here. She didn't want to feel the softening toward the vampires that was going on in my head. She didn't want to deal with Seth's cozy friendship with them, a friendship that was only getting stronger.

Funny, though, I'd've thought her biggest issue would just be me. We'd always gotten on each other's nerves

when we were in Sam's pack. But there was no antagonism toward me now at all, just the Cullens and Bella. I wondered why. Maybe it was simply gratitude that I wasn't forcing her to leave. Maybe it was because I understood her hostility better now. Whichever, running with Leah wasn't nearly as bad as I'd expected. Of course, she hadn't eased up that much. The food and clothes Esme had sent for her were all taking a trip downriver right now. Even after I'd eaten my share—not because it smelled nearly irresistible away from the vampire burn, but to set a good example of self-sacrificing tolerance for Leah—she'd refused. The small elk she'd taken down around noon had not totally satisfied her appetite. Did make her mood worse, though. Leah hated eating raw.

Maybe we should run a sweep east? Seth suggested. Go deep, see if they're out there waiting.

I was thinking about that, I agreed. But let's do it when we're all awake. I don't want to let down our guard. We should do it before the Cullens give it a try, though. Soon. Right.

That got me thinking.

If the Cullens were able to get out of the immediate area safely, they really ought to keep on going. They probably should have taken off the second we'd come to warn them. They had to be able to afford other digs. And they had friends up north, right?

Take Bella and run. It seemed like an obvious answer to their problems. I probably ought to suggest that, but I was afraid they would listen to me. And I didn't want to have Bella disappear—to never know whether

she'd made it or not. No, that was stupid. I would tell them to go. It made no sense for them to stay, and it would be better—not less painful, but healthier—for me if Bella left. Easy to say now, when Bella wasn't right there, looking all thrilled to see me and also clinging to life by her fingernails at the same time…

Oh, I already asked Edward about that, Seth thought.

What?

I asked him why they hadn't taken off yet. Gone up to Tanya's place or something. Somewhere too far for Sam to come after them.

I had to remind myself that I'd just decided to give the Cullens that exact advice. That it was best. So I shouldn't be mad at Seth for taking the chore out of my hands. Not mad at all.

So what did he say? Are they waiting for a window?

No. They're not leaving.

And that shouldn't sound like good news.

Why not? That's just stupid.

Not really, Seth said, defensive now. It takes some time to build up the kind of medical access that Carlisle has here. He's got all the stuff he needs to take care of Bella, and the credentials to get more. That's one of the reasons they want to make a hunting run. Carlisle thinks they're going to need more blood for Bella soon. She's using up all the O

negative they stored for her. He doesn't like depleting the stockpile. He's going to buy some more. Did you know you can buy blood? If you're a doctor. I wasn't ready to be logical yet. Still seems stupid. They could bring most of it with them, right? And steal what they need wherever they go. Who cares about legal crap when you're the undead?

Edward doesn't want to take any risks moving her.

She's better than she was.

Seriously, Seth agreed. In his head, he was comparing my memories of Bella hooked up to the tubes with the last time he'd seen her as he'd left the house. She'd smiled at him and waved. But she can't move around much, you know. That thing is kicking the hell out of her.

I swallowed back the stomach acid in my throat. Yeah, I know. Broke another of her ribs, he told me somberly.

My stride faltered, and I staggered a step before I regained my rhythm. Carlisle taped her up again. Just another crack, he said. Then Rosalie said something about how even normal human babies have been known to crack ribs. Edward looked like he was gonna rip her head off.

Too bad he didn't.

Seth was in full report mode now—knowing it was all vitally interesting to me, though I'd never've asked to hear it. Bella's been running a fever off and on today. Just low grade—sweats and then chills. Carlisle's not

sure what to make of it—she might just be sick. Her immune system can't be in peak form right now.

Yeah, I'm sure it's just a coincidence.

She's in a good mood, though. She was chatting with Charlie, laughing and all—

Charlie! What?! What do you mean, she was talking to Charlie?!

Now Seth's pace stuttered; my fury surprised him. Guess he calls every day to talk to her. Sometimes her mom calls, too. Bella sounds so much better now, so she was reassuring him that she was on the mend—

On the mend ? What the hell are they thinking?! Get Charlie's hopes up just so that he can be destroyed even worse when she dies? I thought they were getting him ready for that! Trying to prepare him! Why would she set him up like this?

She might not die, Seth thought quietly.

I took deep breath, trying to calm myself. Seth. Even if she pulls through this, she's not doing it human. She knows that, and so do the rest of them. If she doesn't die, she's going to have to do a pretty convincing impersonation of a corpse, kid. Either that, or disappear. I thought they were trying to make this easier on Charlie. Why… ?

Think it's Bella's idea. No one said anything, but Edward's face kinda went right along with what you're thinking now.

On the same wavelength with the bloodsucker yet again.

We ran in silence for a few minutes. I started off along a new line, probing south. Don't get too far.

Why?

Bella asked me to ask you to stop by.

My teeth locked together.

Alice wants you, too. She says she's tired of hanging out in the attic like the vampire bat in the belfry. Seth snorted a laugh. I was switching off with Edward before. Trying to keep Bella's temperature stable. Cold to hot, as needed. I guess, if you don't want to do it, I could go back—

No. I got it, I snapped.

Okay. Seth didn't make any more comments. He concentrated very hard on the empty forest.

I kept my southern course, searching for anything new. I turned around when I got close to the first signs of habitation. Not near the town yet, but I didn't want to get any wolf rumors going again. We'd been nice and invisible for a long while now. I passed right through the perimeter on my way back, heading for the house. As much as I knew it was a stupid thing to do, I couldn't stop myself. I must be some kind of masochist.

There's nothing wrong with you, Jake. This isn't the most normal situation. Shut up, please, Seth.

Shutting.

I didn't hesitate at the door this time; I just walked through like I owned the place. I figured that would piss Rosalie off, but it was a wasted effort. Neither Rosalie or Bella were anywhere in sight. I looked around wildly, hoping I'd missed them somewhere, my heart squeezing against my ribs in a weird, uncomfortable way.

"She's all right," Edward whispered. "Or, the same, I should say."

Edward was on the couch with his face in his hands; he hadn't looked up to speak. Esme was next to him, her arm wrapped tight around his shoulders.

"Hello, Jacob," she said. "I'm so glad you came back."

"Me, too," Alice said with a deep sigh. She came prancing down the stairs, making a face. Like I was late for an appointment.

"Uh, hey," I said. It felt weird to try to be polite.

"Where's Bella?"

"Bathroom," Alice told me. "Mostly fluid diet, you know. Plus, the whole pregnancy thing does that to you, I hear."

"Ah."

I stood there awkwardly, rocking back and forth on my heels.

"Oh, wonderful," Rosalie grumbled. I whipped my head around and saw her coming from a hall half-

hidden behind the stairway. She had Bella cradled gently in her arms, a harsh sneer on her face for me. “I knew I smelled something nasty.”

And, just like before, Bella’s face lit up like a kid’s on Christmas morning. Like I’d brought her the greatest gift ever.

It was so unfair.

“Jacob,” she breathed. “You came.”

“Hi, Bells.”

Esme and Edward both got up. I watched how carefully Rosalie laid Bella out on the couch. I watched how, despite that, Bella turned white and held her breath—like she was set on not making any noise no matter how much it hurt.

Edward brushed his hand across her forehead and then along her neck. He tried to make it look as if he was just sweeping her hair back, but it looked like a doctor’s examination to me.

“Are you cold?” he murmured.

“I’m fine.”

“Bella, you know what Carlisle told you,” Rosalie said. “Don’t downplay anything. It doesn’t help us take care of either of you.”

“Okay, I’m a little cold. Edward, can you hand me that blanket?”

I rolled my eyes. “Isn’t that sort of the point of me being here?”

"You just walked in," Bella said. "After running all day, I'd bet. Put your feet up for a minute. I'll probably warm up again in no time."

I ignored her, going to sit on the floor next the sofa while she was still telling me what to do. At that point, though, I wasn't sure how.... She looked pretty brittle, and I was afraid to move her, even to put my arms around her. So I just leaned carefully against her side, letting my arm rest along the length of hers, and held her hand. Then I put my other hand against her face. It was hard to tell if she felt colder than usual.

"Thanks, Jake," she said, and I felt her shiver once.

"Yeah," I said.

Edward sat on the arm of the sofa by Bella's feet, his eyes always on her face. It was too much to hope, with all the super-hearing in the room, that no one would notice my stomach rumbling.

"Rosalie, why don't you get Jacob something from the kitchen?" Alice said. She was invisible now, sitting quietly behind the back of the sofa.

Rosalie stared at the place Alice's voice had come from in disbelief.

"Thanks, anyway, Alice, but I don't think I'd want to eat something Blondie's spit in. I'd bet my system wouldn't take too kindly to venom."

"Rosalie would never embarrass Esme by displaying such a lack of hospitality."

"Of course not," Blondie said in a sugar-sweet voice that I immediately distrusted. She got up and breezed out of the room.

Edward sighed.

"You'd tell me if she poisoned it, right?" I asked.

"Yes," Edward promised.

And for some reason I believed him.

There was a lot of banging in the kitchen, and—weirdly—the sound of metal protesting as it was abused. Edward sighed again, but smiled just a little, too. Then Rosalie was back before I could think much more about it. With a pleased smirk, she set a silver bowl on the floor next to me.

"Enjoy, mongrel."

It had once probably been a big mixing bowl, but she'd bent the bowl back in on itself until it was shaped almost exactly like a dog dish. I had to be impressed with her quick craftsmanship. And her attention to detail. She'd scratched the word Fido into the side. Excellent handwriting.

Because the food looked pretty good—steak, no less, and a big baked potato with all the fixings—I told her, "Thanks, Blondie."

She snorted.

"Hey, do you know what you call a blonde with a brain?" I asked, and then continued on the same breath, "a golden retriever."

"I've heard that one, too," she said, no longer smiling.

"I'll keep trying," I promised, and then I dug in.

She made a disgusted face and rolled her eyes. Then she sat in one of the armchairs and started flicking through channels on the big TV so fast that there was no way she could really be surfing for something to watch.

The food was good, even with the vampire stink in the air. I was getting really used to that. Huh. Not something I'd been wanting to do, exactly…

When I was finished—though I was considering licking the bowl, just to give Rosalie something to complain about—I felt Bella's cold fingers pulling softly through my hair. She patted it down against the back of my neck.

"Time for a haircut, huh?"

"You're getting a little shaggy," she said. "Maybe—"

"Let me guess, someone around here used to cut hair in a salon in Paris?"

She chuckled. "Probably."

"No thanks," I said before she could really offer. "I'm good for a few more weeks."

Which made me wonder how long she was good for. I tried to think of a polite way to ask.

"So… um… what's the, er, date? You know, the due date for the little monster."

She smacked the back of my head with about as much force as a drifting feather, but didn't answer.

"I'm serious," I told her. "I want to know how long I'm gonna have to be here." How long you're gonna be here, I added in my head. I turned to look at her then. Her eyes were thoughtful; the stress line was there between her brows again.

"I don't know," she murmured. "Not exactly. Obviously, we're not going with the ninemonth model here, and we can't get an ultrasound, so Carlisle is guesstimating from how big I am. Normal people are supposed to be about forty centimeters here"—she ran her finger right down the middle of her bulging stomach—"when the baby is fully grown. One centimeter for every week. I was thirty this morning, and I've been gaining about two centimeters a day, sometimes more. . . ."

Two weeks to a day, the days flying by. Her life speeding by in fast-forward. How many days did that give her, if she was counting to forty? Four? It took me a minute to figure out how to swallow.

"You okay?" she asked.

I nodded, not really sure how my voice would come out.

Edward's face was turned away from us as he listened to my thoughts, but I could see his reflection in the glass wall. He was the burning man again. Funny how having a deadline made it harder to think about leaving, or having her leave. I was glad Seth'd brought that up, so I knew they were staying here. It would be

intolerable, wondering if they were about to go, to take away one or two or three of those four days. My four days.

Also funny how, even knowing that it was almost over, the hold she had on me only got harder to break. Almost like it was related to her expanding belly—as if by getting bigger, she was gaining gravitational force.

For a minute I tried to look at her from a distance, to separate myself from the pull. I knew it wasn't my imagination that my need for her was stronger than ever. Why was that? Because she was dying? Or knowing that even if she didn't, still—best case scenario—she'd be changing into something else that I wouldn't know or understand?

She ran her finger across my cheekbone, and my skin was wet where she touched it.

"It's going to be okay," she sort of crooned. It didn't matter that the words meant nothing. She said it the way people sang those senseless nursery rhymes to kids. Rocka-bye, baby.

"Right," I muttered.

She curled against my arm, resting her head on my shoulder. "I didn't think you would come. Seth said you would, and so did Edward, but I didn't believe them."

"Why not?" I asked gruffly.

"You're not happy here. But you came anyway."

"You wanted me here."

"I know. But you didn't have to come, because it's not fair for me to want you here. I would have understood."

It was quiet for a minute. Edward'd put his face back together. He looked at the TV as Rosalie went on flipping through the channels. She was into the six hundreds. I wondered how long it would take to get back to the beginning.

"Thank you for coming," Bella whispered.

"Can I ask you something?" I asked.

"Of course."

Edward didn't look like he was paying attention to us at all, but he knew what I was about to ask, so he didn't fool me.

"Why do you want me here? Seth could keep you warm, and he's probably easier to be around, happy little punk. But when I walk in the door, you smile like I'm your favorite person in the world."

"You're one of them."

"That sucks, you know."

"Yeah." She sighed. "Sorry."

"Why, though? You didn't answer that."

Edward was looking away again, like he was staring out the windows. His face was blank in the reflection.

"It feels… complete when you're here, Jacob. Like all my family is together. I mean, I guess that's what it's like—I've never had a big family before now. It's nice." She smiled for half a second. "But it's just not whole unless you're here."

"I'll never be part of your family, Bella."

I could have been. I would have been good there. But that was just a distant future that died long before it had a chance to live.

"You've always been a part of my family," she disagreed.

My teeth made a grinding sound. "That's a crap answer."

"What's a good one?"

"How about, 'Jacob, I get a kick out of your pain.'"

I felt her flinch.

"You'd like that better?" she whispered.

"It's easier, at least. I could wrap my head around it. I could deal with it."

I looked back down at her face then, so close to mine. Her eyes were shut and she was frowning. "We got off track, Jake. Out of balance. You're supposed to be part of my life

—I can feel that, and so can you." She paused for a second without opening her eyes—

like she was waiting for me to deny it. When I didn't say anything, she went on. "But not like this. We did something wrong. No. I did. I did something wrong, and we got off track. . . ."

Her voice trailed off, and the frown on her face relaxed until it was just a little pucker at the corner of her lips. I waited for her to pour some more lemon juice into my paper cuts, but then a soft snore came from the back of her throat.

"She's exhausted," Edward murmured. "It's been a long day. A hard day. I think she would have gone to sleep earlier, but she was waiting for you."

I didn't look at him.

"Seth said it broke another of her ribs."

"Yes. It's making it hard for her to breathe."

"Great."

"Let me know when she gets hot again."

"Yeah."

She still had goose bumps on the arm that wasn't touching mine. I'd barely raised my head to look for a blanket when Edward snagged one draped over the arm of the sofa and flung it out so that it settled over her.

Occasionally, the mind-reading thing saved time. For example, maybe I wouldn't have to make a big production out of the accusation about what was

going on with Charlie. That mess. Edward would just hear exactly how furious—

"Yes," he agreed. "It's not a good idea."

"Then why?" Why was Bella telling her father she was on the mend when it would only make him more miserable?

"She can't bear his anxiety."

"So it's better—"

"No. It's not better. But I'm not going to force her to do anything that makes her unhappy now. Whatever happens, this makes her feel better. I'll deal with the rest afterward."

That didn't sound right. Bella wouldn't just shuffle Charlie's pain off to some later date, for someone else to face. Even dying. That wasn't her. If I knew Bella, she had to have some other plan.

"She's very sure she's going to live," Edward said.

"But not human," I protested.

"No, not human. But she hopes to see Charlie again, anyway."

Oh, this just got better and better.

"See. Charlie." I finally looked at him, my eyes bugging. "Afterwards. See Charlie when she's all sparkly white with the bright red eyes. I'm not a bloodsucker, so maybe I'm missing something, but Charlie seems like kind of a strange choice for her first meal."

Edward sighed. “She knows she won’t be able to be near him for at least a year. She thinks she can stall. Tell Charlie she has to go to a special hospital on the other side of the world. Keep in contact through phone calls. . . .”

“That’s insane.”

“Yes.”

“Charlie’s not stupid. Even if she doesn’t kill him, he’s going to notice a difference.”

“She’s sort of banking on that.”

I continued to stare, waiting for him to explain.

“She wouldn’t be aging, of course, so that would set a time limit, even if Charlie accepted whatever excuse she comes up with for the changes.” He smiled faintly. “Do you remember when you tried to tell her about your transformation? How you made her guess?”

My free hand flexed into a fist. “She told you about that?”

“Yes. She was explaining her… idea. You see, she’s not allowed to tell Charlie the truth

—it would be very dangerous for him. But he’s a smart, practical man. She thinks he’ll come up with his own explanation. She assumes he’ll get it wrong.” Edward snorted.

“After all, we hardly adhere to vampire canon. He’ll make some wrong assumption about us, like she did

in the beginning, and we'll go along with it. She thinks she'll be able to see him… from time to time."

"Insane," I repeated.

"Yes," he agreed again.

It was weak of him to let her get her way on this, just to keep her happy now. It wouldn't turn out well.

Which made me think that he probably wasn't expecting her to live to try out her crazy plan. Placating her, so that she could be happy for a little while longer. Like four more days.

"I'll deal with whatever comes," he whispered, and he turned his face down and away so that I couldn't even read his reflection. "I won't cause her pain now."

"Four days?" I asked.

He didn't look up. "Approximately."

"Then what?"

"What do you mean, exactly?"

I thought about what Bella had said. About the thing being wrapped up nice and tight in something strong, something like vampire skin. So how did that work? How did it get out?

"From what little research we've been able to do, it would appear the creatures use their own teeth to escape the womb," he whispered.

I had to pause to swallow back the bile.

"Research?" I asked weakly.

"That's why you haven't seen Jasper and Emmett around. That's what Carlisle is doing now. Trying to decipher ancient stories and myths, as much as we can with what we have to work with here, looking for anything that might help us predict the creature's behavior."

Stories? If there were myths, then…

"Then is this thing not the first of its kind?" Edward asked, anticipating my question.

"Maybe. It's all very sketchy. The myths could easily be the products of fear and imagination. Though . . ."—he hesitated—"your myths are true, are they not? Perhaps these are, too. They do seem to be localized, linked. . . ."

"How did you find… ?"

"There was a woman we encountered in South America. She'd been raised in the traditions of her people. She'd heard warnings about such creatures, old stories that had been passed down."

"What were the warnings?" I whispered.

"That the creature must be killed immediately. Before it could gain too much strength."

Just like Sam thought. Was he right?

"Of course, their legends say the same of us. That we must be destroyed. That we are soulless murderers."

Two for two.

Edward laughed one hard chuckle.

"What did their stories say about the… mothers?"

Agony ripped across his face, and, as I flinched away from his pain, I knew he wasn't going to give me an answer. I doubted he could talk.

It was Rosalie—who'd been so still and quiet since Bella'd fallen asleep that I'd nearly forgotten her—who answered.

She made a scornful noise in the back of her throat. "Of course there were no survivors," she said. No survivors, blunt and uncaring. "Giving birth in the middle of a disease-infested swamp with a medicine man smearing sloth spit across your face to drive out the evil spirits was never the safest method. Even the normal births went badly half the time. None of them had what this baby has—caregivers with an idea of what the baby needs, who try to meet those needs. A doctor with a totally unique knowledge of vampire nature. A plan in place to deliver the baby as safely as possible. Venom that will repair anything that goes wrong. The baby will be fine. And those other mothers would probably have survived if they'd had that—if they even existed in the first place. Something I am not convinced of." She sniffed disdainfully.

The baby, the baby. Like that was all that mattered. Bella's life was a minor detail to her

—easy to blow off.

Edward's face went white as snow. His hands curved into claws. Totally egotistical and indifferent, Rosalie twisted in her chair so that her back was to him. He leaned forward, shifting into a crouch.

Allow me, I suggested.

He paused, raising one eyebrow.

Silently, I lifted my doggy bowl off the floor. Then, with a quick, powerful flip of my wrist, I threw it into the back of Blondie's head so hard that—with an earsplitting bang

—it smashed flat before it ricocheted across the room and snapped the round top piece off the thick newel post at the foot of the stairs.

Bella twitched but didn't wake up.

"Dumb blonde," I muttered.

Rosalie turned her head slowly, and her eyes were blazing.

"You. Got. Food. In. My. Hair."

That did it.

I busted up. I pulled away from Bella so that I wouldn't shake her, and laughed so hard that tears ran down my face. From behind the couch, I heard Alice's tinkling laugh join in.

I wondered why Rosalie didn't spring. I sort of expected it. But then I realized that my laughing had woken Bella up, though she'd slept right through the real noise.

"What's so funny?" she mumbled.

"I got food in her hair," I told her, chortling again.

"I'm not going to forget this, dog," Rosalie hissed.

"S'not so hard to erase a blonde's memory," I countered. "Just blow in her ear."

"Get some new jokes," she snapped.

"C'mon, Jake. Leave Rose alo—" Bella broke off mid-sentence and sucked in a sharp breath. In the same second, Edward was leaning over the top of me, ripping the blanket out of the way. She seemed to convulse, her back arching off the sofa.

"He's just," she panted, "stretching."

Her lips were white, and she had her teeth locked together like she was trying to hold back a scream.

Edward put both hands on either side of her face.

"Carlisle?" he called in a tense, low voice.

"Right here," the doctor said. I hadn't heard him come in.

"Okay," Bella said, still breathing hard and shallow. "Think it's over. Poor kid doesn't have enough room, that's all. He's getting so big."

It was really hard to take, that adoring tone she used to describe the thing that was tearing her up. Especially after Rosalie's callousness. Made me wish I could throw something at Bella, too.

She didn't pick up on my mood. "You know, he reminds me of you, Jake," she said—

affectionate tone—still gasping.

"Do not compare me to that thing," I spit out through my teeth.

"I just meant your growth spurt," she said, looking like I'd hurt her feelings. Good.

"You shot right up. I could watch you getting taller by the minute. He's like that, too. Growing so fast."

I bit my tongue to keep from saying what I wanted to say—hard enough that I tasted blood in my mouth. Of course, it would heal before I could swallow. That's what Bella needed. To be strong like me, to be able to heal....

She took an easier breath and then relaxed back into the sofa, her body going limp.

"Hmm," Carlisle murmured. I looked up, and his eyes were on me.

"What?" I demanded.

Edward's head leaned to one side as he reflected on whatever was in Carlisle's head.

"You know that I was wondering about the fetus's genetic makeup, Jacob. About his chromosomes."

"What of it?"

"Well, taking your similarities into consideration—"

"Similari ties?" I growled, not appreciating the plural.

"The accelerated growth, and the fact that Alice cannot see either of you."

I felt my face go blank. I'd forgotten about that other one.

"Well, I wonder if that means that we have an answer. If the similarities are gene-deep."

"Twenty-four pairs," Edward muttered under his breath.

"You don't know that."

"No. But it's interesting to speculate," Carlisle said in a soothing voice.

"Yeah. Just fascinating."

Bella's light snore started up again, accenting my sarcasm nicely. They got into it then, quickly taking the genetics conversation to a point where the only words I could understand were the the's and the and's. And my own name, of course. Alice joined in, commenting now and then in her chirpy bird voice. Even though they were talking about me, I didn't try to figure out the conclusions they were drawing. I had other things on my mind, a few facts I was trying to reconcile. Fact one, Bella'd said that the creature was protected by something as strong as vampire skin, something that was too impenetrable for ultrasounds, too tough for needles. Fact two, Rosalie'd said they had a plan to deliver the creature safely. Fact three, Edward'd said that—in myths—other monsters like this one would chew their way out of their own mothers.

I shuddered.

And that made a sick kind of sense, because, fact four, not many things could cut through something as strong as vampire skin. The half-creature's teeth—according to myth—were strong enough. My teeth were strong enough.

And vampire teeth were strong enough.

It was hard to miss the obvious, but I sure wished I could. Because I had a pretty good idea exactly how Rosalie planned to get that thing "safely" out.

# Chapter 16

## TOO-MUCH-INFORMATION ALERT

I took off early, long before sunrise was due. I'd gotten just a little bit of uneasy sleep leaning against the side of the sofa. Edward woke me when Bella's face was flushed, and he took my spot to cool her back down. I stretched and decided I was rested enough to get some work done.

"Thank you," Edward said quietly, seeing my plans. "If the route is clear, they'll go today."

"I'll let you know."

It felt good to get back to my animal self. I was stiff from sitting still for so long. I extended my stride, working out the kinks.

Morning, Jacob, Leah greeted me.

Good, you're up. How long's Seth been out?

Not out yet, Seth thought sleepily. Almost there. What do you need?

You think you got another hour in you?

Sure thing. No problem. Seth got to his feet right away, shaking out his fur. Let's make the deep run, I told Leah. Seth, take the perimeter. Gotcha. Seth broke into an easy jog.

Off on another vampire errand, Leah grumbled.

You got a problem with that?

Of course not. I just love to coddle those darling leeches. Good. Let's see how fast we can run.

Okay, I'm definitely up for that !

Leah was on the far western rim of the perimeter. Rather than cut close to the Cullens'

house, she stuck to the circle as she raced around to meet me. I sprinted off straight east, knowing that even with the head start, she'd be passing me soon if I took it easy for even a second.

Nose to the ground, Leah. This isn't a race, it's a reconnaissance mission. I can do both and still kick your butt.

I gave her that one. I know.

She laughed.

We took a winding path through the eastern mountains. It was a familiar route. We'd run these mountains when the vampires had left a year ago, making it part of our patrol route to better protect the people here. Then we'd pulled back the lines when the Cullens returned. This was their treaty land.

But that fact would probably mean nothing to Sam now. The treaty was dead. The question today was how thin he was willing to spread his force. Was he looking for stray Cullens to poach on their land or not? Had Jared spoken the truth or taken advantage of the silence between us?

We got deeper and deeper into the mountains without finding any trace of the pack. Fading vampire trails

were everywhere, but the scents were familiar now. I was breathing them in all day long.

I found a heavy, somewhat recent concentration on one particular trail—all of them coming and going here except for Edward. Some reason for gathering that must have been forgotten when Edward brought his dying pregnant wife home. I gritted my teeth. Whatever it was, it had nothing to do with me.

Leah didn't push herself past me, though she could have now. I was paying more attention to each new scent than I was to the speed contest. She kept to my right side, running with me rather than racing against me.

We're getting pretty far out here, she commented.

Yeah. If Sam was hunting strays, we should have crossed his trail by now. Makes more sense right now for him to bunker down in La Push, Leah thought. He knows we're giving the bloodsuckers three extra sets of eyes and legs. He's not going to be able to surprise them.

This was just a precaution, really.

Wouldn't want our precious parasites taking unnecessary chances. Nope, I agreed, ignoring the sarcasm.

You've changed so much, Jacob. Talk about one-eighties.

You're not exactly the same Leah I've always known and loved, either. True. Am I less annoying than Paul now?

Amazingly… yes.

Ah, sweet success.

Congrats.

We ran in silence again then. It was probably time to turn around, but neither of us wanted to. It felt nice to run like this. We'd been staring at the same small circle of a trail for too long. It felt good to stretch our muscles and take the rugged terrain. We weren't in a huge hurry, so I thought maybe we should hunt on the way back. Leah was pretty hungry.

Yum, yum, she thought sourly.

It's all in your head, I told her. That's the way wolves eat. It's natural. It tastes fine. If you didn't think about it from a human perspective—

Forget the pep talk, Jacob. I'll hunt. I don't have to like it. Sure, sure, I agreed easily. It wasn't my business if she wanted to make things harder for herself.

She didn't add anything for a few minutes; I started thinking about turning back. Thank you, Leah suddenly told me in a much different tone. For?

For letting me be. For letting me stay. You've been nicer than I had any right to expect, Jacob.

Er, no problem. Actually, I mean that. I don't mind having you here like I thought I would.

She snorted, but it was a playful sound. What a glowing commendation!

Don't let it go to your head.

Okay—if you don't let this go to yours. She paused for a second. I think you make a good Alpha. Not in the same way Sam does, but in your own way. You're worth following, Jacob.

My mind went blank with surprise. It took me a second to recover enough to respond. Er, thanks. Not totally sure I'll be able to stop that one from going to my head, though. Where did that come from?

She didn't answer right away, and I followed the wordless direction of her thoughts. She was thinking about the future—about what I'd said to Jared the other morning. About how the time would be up soon, and then I'd go back to the forest. About how I'd promised that she and Seth would return to the pack when the Cullens were gone. . . . I want to stay with you, she told me.

The shock shot through my legs, locking my joints. She blew past me and then put on the brakes. Slowly, she walked back to where I was frozen in place. I won't be a pain, I swear. I won't follow you around. You can go wherever you want, and I'll go where I want. You'll only have to put up with me when we're both wolves. She paced back and forth in front of me, swishing her long gray tail nervously. And, as I'm planning on quitting as soon as I can manage it… maybe that won't be so often. I didn't know what to say.

I'm happier now, as a part of your pack, than I have been in years. I want to stay, too, Seth thought quietly. I hadn't realized he'd been paying much

attention to us as he ran the perimeter. I like this pack.

Hey, now! Seth, this isn't going to be a pack much longer. I tried to put my thoughts together so they would convince him. We've got a purpose now, but when… after that's over, I'm just going to go wolf. Seth, you need a purpose. You're a good kid. You're the kind of person who always has a crusade. And there's no way you're leaving La Push now. You're going to graduate from high school and do something with your life. You're going to take care of Sue. My issues are not going to mess up your future. But—

Jacob is right, Leah seconded.

You're agreeing with me?

Of course. But none of that applies to me . I was on my way out, anyway. I'll get a job somewhere away from La Push. Maybe take some courses at a community college. Get into yoga and meditation to work on my temper issues…. And stay a part of this pack for the sake of my mental well-being. Jacob—you can see how that makes sense, right?

I won't bother you, you won't bother me, everyone is happy. I turned back and started loping slowly toward the west.

This is a bit much to deal with, Leah. Let me think about it, 'kay?

Sure. Take your time.

It took us longer to make the run back. I wasn't trying for speed. I was just trying to concentrate enough

that I wouldn't plow headfirst into a tree. Seth was grumbling a little bit in the back of my head, but I was able to ignore him. He knew I was right. He wasn't going to abandon his mom. He would go back to La Push and protect the tribe like he should.

But I couldn't see Leah doing that. And that was just plain scary. A pack of the two of us? No matter the physical distance, I couldn't imagine the… the intimacy of that situation. I wondered if she'd really thought it through, or if she was just desperate to stay free.

Leah didn't say anything as I chewed it over. It was like she was trying to prove how easy it would be if it was just us.

We ran into a herd of black-tailed deer just as the sun was coming up, brightening the clouds a little bit behind us. Leah sighed internally but didn't hesitate. Her lunge was clean and efficient—graceful, even. She took down the largest one, the buck, before the startled animal fully understood the danger.

Not to be outdone, I swooped down on the next largest deer, snapping her neck between my jaws quickly, so she wouldn't feel unnecessary pain. I could feel Leah's disgust warring with her hunger, and I tried to make it easier for her by letting the wolf in me have my head. I'd lived all-wolf for long enough that I knew how to be the animal completely, to see his way and think his way. I let the practical instincts take over, letting her feel that, too. She hesitated for a second, but then, tentatively, she seemed to reach out with her mind and try to see my way. It felt very

strange—our minds were more closely linked than they had ever been before, because we both were trying to think together.

Strange, but it helped her. Her teeth cut through the fur and skin of her kill's shoulder, tearing away a thick slab of streaming flesh. Rather than wince away as her human thoughts wanted to, she let her wolf-self react instinctively. It was kind of a numbing thing, a thoughtless thing. It let her eat in peace.

It was easy for me to do the same. And I was glad I hadn't forgotten this. This would be my life again soon.

Was Leah going to be a part of that life? A week ago, I would've found that idea beyond horrifying. I wouldn't've been able to stand it. But I knew her better now. And, relieved from the constant pain, she wasn't the same wolf. Not the same girl. We ate together until we both were full.

Thanks, she told me later as she was cleaning her muzzle and paws against the wet grass. I didn't bother; it had just started to drizzle and we had to swim the river again on our way back. I'd get clean enough. That wasn't so bad, thinking your way. You're welcome.

Seth was dragging when we hit the perimeter. I told him to get some sleep; Leah and I would take over the patrol. Seth's mind faded into unconsciousness just seconds later. You headed back to the bloodsuckers? Leah asked.

Maybe.

It’s hard for you to be there, but hard to stay away, too. I know how that feels. You know, Leah, you might want to think a little bit about the future, about what you really want to do. My head is not going to be the happiest place on earth. And you’ll have to suffer right along with me.

She thought about how to answer me. Wow, this is going to sound bad. But, honestly, it will be easier to deal with your pain than face mine.

Fair enough.

I know it’s going to be bad for you, Jacob. I understand that—maybe better than you think. I don’t like her, but… she’s your Sam. She’s everything you want and everything you can’t have.

I couldn’t answer.

I know it’s worse for you. At least Sam is happy. At least he’s alive and well. I love him enough that I want that. I want him to have what’s best for him. She sighed. I just don’t want to stick around to watch.

Do we need to talk about this?

I think we do. Because I want you to know that I won’t make it worse for you. Hell, maybe I’ll even help. I wasn’t born a compassionless shrew. I used to be sort of nice, you know.

My memory doesn’t go that far back.

We both laughed once.

I'm sorry about this, Jacob. I'm sorry you're in pain. I'm sorry it's getting worse and not better.

Thanks, Leah.

She thought about the things that were worse, the black pictures in my head, while I tried to tune her out without much success. She was able to look at them with some distance, some perspective, and I had to admit that this was helpful. I could imagine that maybe I would be able to see it that way, too, in a few years.

She saw the funny side of the daily irritations that came from hanging out around vampires. She liked my ragging on Rosalie, chuckling internally and even running through a few blonde jokes in her mind that I might be able to work in. But then her thoughts turned serious, lingering on Rosalie's face in a way that confused me. You know what's crazy? she asked.

Well, almost everything is crazy right now. But what do you mean?

That blond vampire you hate so much—I totally get her perspective. For a second I thought she was making a joke that was in very poor taste. And then, when I realized she was serious, the fury that ripped through me was hard to control. It was a good thing we'd spread out to run our watch. If she'd been within biting distance…

Hold up! Let me explain!

Don't want to hear it. I'm outta here.

Wait! Wait! she pleaded as I tried to calm myself enough to phase back. C'mon, Jake!

Leah, this isn't really the best way to convince me that I want to spend more time with you in the future.

Yeesh! What an overreaction. You don't even know what I'm talking about. So what are you talking about?

And then she was suddenly the pain-hardened Leah from before. I'm talking about being a genetic dead end, Jacob.

The vicious edge to her words left me floundering. I hadn't expected to have my anger trumped.

I don't understand.

You would , if you weren't just like the rest of them. If my "female stuff" —she thought the words with a hard, sarcastic tone— didn't send you running for cover just like any stupid male, so you could actually pay attention to what it all means. Oh.

Yeah, so none of us like to think about that stuff with her. Who would? Of course I remembered Leah's panic that first month after she joined the pack—and I remembered cringing away from it just like everyone else. Because she couldn't be pregnant—not unless there was some really freaky religious immaculate crap going on. She hadn't been with anyone since Sam. And then, when the weeks dragged on and nothing turned into more nothing, she'd realized that her body wasn't following the normal patterns anymore. The horror—what was she now? Had her

body changed because she'd become a werewolf? Or had she become a werewolf because her body was wrong? The only female werewolf in the history of forever. Was that because she wasn't as female as she should be?

None of us had wanted to deal with that breakdown. Obviously, it wasn't like we could empathize.

You know why Sam thinks we imprint, she thought, calmer now. Sure. To carry on the line.

Right. To make a bunch of new little werewolves. Survival of the species, genetic override. You're drawn to the person who gives you the best chance to pass on the wolf gene.

I waited for her to tell me where she was going with this.

If I was any good for that, Sam would have been drawn to me . Her pain was enough that I broke stride under it.

But I'm not. There's something wrong with me. I don't have the ability to pass on the gene, apparently, despite my stellar bloodlines. So I become a freak—the girlie-wolf—

good for nothing else. I'm a genetic dead end and we both know it. We do not, I argued with her. That's just Sam's theory. Imprinting happens, but we don't know why. Billy thinks it's something else.

I know, I know. He thinks you're imprinting to make stronger wolves. Because you and Sam are such humongous monsters—bigger than our fathers. But

either way, I’m still not a candidate. I’m… I’m menopausal. I’m twenty years old and I’m menopausal. Ugh. I so didn’t want to have this conversation. You don’t know that, Leah. It’s probably just the whole frozen-in-time thing. When you quit your wolf and start getting older again, I’m sure things will… er… pick right back up.

I might think that—except that no one’s imprinting on me , notwithstanding my impressive pedigree. You know, she added thoughtfully, if you weren’t around, Seth would probably have the best claim to being Alpha—through his blood, at least. Of course, no one would ever consider me. . . .

You really want to imprint, or be imprinted on, or whichever? I demanded. What’s wrong with going out and falling in love like a normal person, Leah? Imprinting is just another way of getting your choices taken away from you.

Sam, Jared, Paul, Quil… they don’t seem to mind.

None of them have a mind of their own.

You don’t want to imprint?

Hell, no!

That’s just because you’re already in love with her . That would go away, you know, if you imprinted. You wouldn’t have to hurt over her anymore.

Do you want to forget the way you feel about Sam?

She deliberated for a moment. I think I do.

I sighed. She was in a healthier place than I was.

But back to my original point, Jacob. I understand why your blond vampire is so cold—

in the figurative sense. She's focused. She's got her eyes on the prize, right? Because you always want the very most what you can never, ever have. You would act like Rosalie? You would murder someone—because that's what she's doing, making sure no one interferes with Bella's death—you would do that to have a baby? Since when are you a breeder?

I just want the options I don't have, Jacob. Maybe, if there was nothing wrong with me, I would never give it a thought.

You would kill for that? I demanded, not letting her escape my question. That's not what she's doing. I think it's more like she's living vicariously. And… if Bella asked me to help her with this… She paused, considering. Even though I don't think too much of her, I'd probably do the same as the bloodsucker.

A loud snarl ripped through my teeth.

Because, if it was turned around, I'd want Bella to do that for me. And so would Rosalie. We'd both do it her way.

Ugh! You're as bad as they are!

That's the funny thing about knowing you can't have something. It makes you desperate. And… that's my limit. Right there. This conversation is over. Fine.

It wasn't enough that she'd agreed to stop. I wanted a stronger termination than that. I was only about a mile from where I'd left my clothes, so I phased back to human and walked. I didn't think about our conversation. Not because there wasn't anything to think about, but because I couldn't stand it. I would not see it that way—but it was harder to keep from doing that when Leah had put the thoughts and emotions straight into my head.

Yeah, I wasn't running with her when this was finished. She could go be miserable in La Push. One little Alpha command before I left for good wasn't going to kill anybody. It was real early when I got to the house. Bella was probably still asleep. I figured I'd poke my head in, see what was going on, give 'em the green light to go hunting, and then find a patch of grass soft enough to sleep on while human. I wasn't phasing back until Leah was asleep.

But there was a lot of low mumbling going on inside the house, so maybe Bella wasn't sleeping. And then I heard the machinery sound from upstairs again—the X-ray? Great. It looked like day four on the countdown was starting off with a bang. Alice opened the door for me before I could walk in.

She nodded. "Hey, wolf."

"Hey, shortie. What's going on upstairs?" The big room was empty—all the murmurs were on the second floor.

She shrugged her pointy little shoulders. "Maybe another break." She tried to say the words casually, but I could see the flames in the very back of her

eyes. Edward and I weren't the only ones who were burning over this. Alice loved Bella, too.

"Another rib?" I asked hoarsely.

"No. Pelvis this time."

Funny how it kept hitting me, like each new thing was a surprise. When was I going to stop being surprised? Each new disaster seemed kinda obvious in hindsight. Alice was staring at my hands, watching them tremble.

Then we were listening to Rosalie's voice upstairs.

"See, I told you I didn't hear a crack. You need your ears checked, Edward."

There was no answer.

Alice made a face. "Edward's going to end up ripping Rose into small pieces, I think. I'm surprised she doesn't see that. Or maybe she thinks Emmett will be able to stop him."

"I'll take Emmett," I offered. "You can help Edward with the ripping part."

Alice half-smiled.

The procession came down the stairs then—Edward had Bella this time. She was gripping her cup of blood in both hands, and her face was white. I could see that, though he compensated for every tiny movement of his body to keep from jostling her, she was hurting.

"Jake," she whispered, and she smiled through the pain.

I stared at her, saying nothing.

Edward placed Bella carefully on her couch and sat on the floor by her head. I wondered briefly why they didn't leave her upstairs, and then decided at once that it must be Bella's idea. She'd want to act like things were normal, avoid the hospital setup. And he was humoring her. Naturally.

Carlisle came down slowly, the last one, his face creased with worry. It made him look old enough to be a doctor for once.

"Carlisle," I said. "We went halfway to Seattle. There's no sign of the pack. You're good to go."

"Thank you, Jacob. This is good timing. There's much that we need." His black eyes flickered to the cup that Bella was holding so tight.

"Honestly, I think you're safe to take more than three. I'm pretty positive that Sam is concentrating on La Push."

Carlisle nodded in agreement. It surprised me how willingly he took my advice. "If you think so. Alice, Esme, Jasper, and I will go. Then Alice can take Emmett and Rosa—"

"Not a chance," Rosalie hissed. "Emmett can go with you now."

"You should hunt," Carlisle said in a gentle voice.

His tone didn't soften hers. "I'll hunt when he does," she growled, jerking her head toward Edward and then flipping her hair back.

Carlisle sighed.

Jasper and Emmett were down the stairs in a flash, and Alice joined them by the glass back door in the same second. Esme flitted to Alice's side.

Carlisle put his hand on my arm. The icy touch did not feel good, but I didn't jerk away. I held still, half in surprise, and half because I didn't want to hurt his feelings.

"Thank you," he said again, and then he darted out the door with the other four. My eyes followed them as they flew across the lawn and then disappeared before I took another breath. Their needs must have been more urgent than I'd imagined. There was no sound for a minute. I could feel someone glaring at me, and I knew who it would be. I'd been planning to take off and get some Z's, but the chance to ruin Rosalie's morning seemed too good to pass up.

So I sauntered over to the armchair next to the one Rosalie had and settled in, sprawling out so that my head was tilted toward Bella and my left foot was near Rosalie's face.

"Ew. Someone put the dog out," she murmured, wrinkling her nose.

"Have you heard this one, Psycho? How do a blonde's brain cells die?"

She didn't say anything.

"Well?" I asked. "Do you know the punch line or not?"

She looked pointedly at the TV and ignored me.

“Has she heard it?” I asked Edward.

There was no humor on his tense face—he didn’t move his eyes from Bella. But he said,

“No.”

“Awesome. So you’ll enjoy this, bloodsucker—a blonde’s brain cells die alone.”

Rosalie still didn’t look at me. “I have killed a hundred times more often than you have, you disgusting beast. Don’t forget that.”

“Someday, Beauty Queen, you’re going to get tired of just threatening me. I’m really looking forward to that.”

“Enough, Jacob,” Bella said.

I looked down, and she was scowling at me. It looked like yesterday’s good mood was long gone.

Well, I didn’t want to bug her. “You want me to take off?” I offered. Before I could hope—or fear—that she’d finally gotten tired of me, she blinked, and her frown disappeared. She seemed totally shocked that I would come to that conclusion.

“No! Of course not.”

I sighed, and I heard Edward sigh very quietly, too. I knew he wished she’d get over me, too. Too bad he’d never ask her to do anything that might make her unhappy.

“You look tired,” Bella commented.

“Dead beat,” I admitted.

“I’d like to beat you dead,” Rosalie muttered, too low for Bella to hear. I just slumped deeper into the chair, getting comfortable. My bare foot dangled closer to Rosalie, and she stiffened. After a few minutes Bella asked Rosalie for a refill. I felt the wind as Rosalie blew upstairs to get her some more blood. It was really quiet. Might as well take a nap, I figured.

And then Edward said, “Did you say something?” in a puzzled tone. Strange. Because no one had said anything, and because Edward’s hearing was as good as mine, and he should have known that.

He was staring at Bella, and she was staring back. They both looked confused.

“Me?” she asked after a second. “I didn’t say anything.”

He moved onto his knees, leaning forward over her, his expression suddenly intense in a whole different way. His black eyes focused on her face.

“What are you thinking about right now?”

She stared at him blankly. “Nothing. What’s going on?”

“What were you thinking about a minute ago?” he asked.

“Just… Esme’s island. And feathers.”

Sounded like total gibberish to me, but then she blushed, and I figured I was better off not knowing.

“Say something else,” he whispered.

“Like what? Edward, what’s going on?”

His face changed again, and he did something that made my mouth fall open with a pop. I heard a gasp behind me, and I knew that Rosalie was back, and just as flabbergasted as I was.

Edward, very lightly, put both of his hands against her huge, round stomach.

“The f—” He swallowed. “It… the baby likes the sound of your voice.”

There was one short beat of total silence. I could not move a muscle, even to blink. Then—

“Holy crow, you can hear him! ” Bella shouted. In the next second, she winced. Edward’s hand moved to the top peak of her belly and gently rubbed the spot where it must have kicked her.

“Shh,” he murmured. “You startled it… him.”

Her eyes got all wide and full of wonder. She patted the side of her stomach. “Sorry, baby.”

Edward was listening hard, his head tilted toward the bulge.

“What’s he thinking now?” she demanded eagerly.

“It… he or she, is . . .” He paused and looked up into her eyes. His eyes were filled with a similar awe—only his were more careful and grudging. “He’s happy,” Edward said in an incredulous voice.

Her breath caught, and it was impossible not to see the fanatical gleam in her eyes. The adoration and the devotion. Big, fat tears overflowed her eyes and ran silently down her face and over her smiling lips.

As he stared at her, his face was not frightened or angry or burning or any of the other expressions he'd worn since their return. He was marveling with her.

"Of course you're happy, pretty baby, of course you are," she crooned, rubbing her stomach while the tears washed her cheeks. "How could you not be, all safe and warm and loved? I love you so much, little EJ, of course you're happy."

"What did you call him?" Edward asked curiously.

She blushed again. "I sort of named him. I didn't think you would want… well, you know."

"EJ?"

"Your father's name was Edward, too."

"Yes, it was. What—?" He paused and then said, "Hmm."

"What?"

"He likes my voice, too."

"Of course he does." Her tone was almost gloating now. "You have the most beautiful voice in the universe. Who wouldn't love it?"

"Do you have a backup plan?" Rosalie asked then, leaning over the back of the sofa with the same

wondering, gloating look on her face that was on Bella's. "What if he's a she?"

Bella wiped the back of her hand under her wet eyes. "I kicked a few things around. Playing with Renée and Esme. I was thinking… Ruh- nez-may."

"Ruhnezmay?"

"R-e-n-e-s-m-e-e. Too weird?"

"No, I like it," Rosalie assured her. Their heads were close together, gold and mahogany. "It's beautiful. And one of a kind, so that fits."

"I still think he's an Edward."

Edward was staring off into space, his face blank as he listened.

"What?" Bella asked, her face just glowing away. "What's he thinking now?"

At first he didn't answer, and then—shocking all the rest of us again, three distinct and separate gasps—he laid his ear tenderly against her belly.

"He loves you," Edward whispered, sounding dazed. "He absolutely adores you."

In that moment, I knew that I was alone. All alone.

I wanted to kick myself when I realized how much I'd been counting on that loathsome vampire. How stupid—as if you could ever trust a leech! Of course he would betray me in the end.

I'd counted on him to be on my side. I'd counted on him to suffer more than I suffered. And, most of all, I'd counted on him to hate that revolting thing killing Bella more than I hated it.

I'd trusted him with that.

Yet now they were together, the two of them bent over the budding, invisible monster with their eyes lit up like a happy family.

And I was all alone with my hatred and the pain that was so bad it was like being tortured. Like being dragged slowly across a bed of razor blades. Pain so bad you'd take death with a smile just to get away from it.

The heat unlocked my frozen muscles, and I was on my feet.

All three of their heads snapped up, and I watched my pain ripple across Edward's face as he trespassed in my head again.

"Ahh," he choked.

I didn't know what I was doing; I stood there, trembling, ready to bolt for the very first escape that I could think of.

Moving like the strike of a snake, Edward darted to a small end table and ripped something from the drawer there. He tossed it at me, and I caught the object reflexively.

"Go, Jacob. Get away from here." He didn't say it harshly—he threw the words at me like they were a

life preserver. He was helping me find the escape I was dying for. The object in my hand was a set of car keys.

# Chapter 17

## WHAT DO I LOOK LIKE? THE WIZARD OF OZ? YOU NEED A BRAIN? YOU NEED A HEART? GO AHEAD. TAKE MINE. TAKE EVERYTHING I HAVE.

I sort of had a plan as I ran to the Cullens' garage. The second part of it was totaling the bloodsucker's car on my way back.

So I was at a loss when I mashed the button on the keyless remote, and it was not his Volvo that beeped and flashed its lights for me. It was another car—a standout even in the long line of vehicles that were mostly all drool-worthy in their own ways. Did he actually mean to give me the keys to an Aston Martin Vanquish, or was that an accident?

I didn't pause to think about it, or if this would change that second part of my plan. I just threw myself into the silky leather seat and cranked the engine while my knees were still crunched up under the steering wheel. The sound of the motor's purr might have made me moan another day, but right now it was all I could do to concentrate enough to put it in drive.

I found the seat release and shoved myself back as my foot rammed the pedal down. The car felt almost airborne as it leaped forward.

It only took seconds to race through the tight, winding drive. The car responded to me like my thoughts were steering rather than my hands. As I blew out of the green tunnel and onto the highway, I

caught a fleeting glimpse of Leah's gray face peering uneasily through the ferns.

For half a second, I wondered what she'd think, and then I realized that I didn't care. I turned south, because I had no patience today for ferries or traffic or anything else that meant I might have to lift my foot off the pedal.

In a sick way, it was my lucky day. If by lucky you meant taking a well-traveled highway at two hundred without so much as seeing one cop, even in the thirty-mile-anhour speed-trap towns. What a letdown. A little chase action might have been nice, not to mention that the license plate info would bring the heat down on the leech. Sure, he'd buy his way out of it, but it might have been just a little inconvenient for him. The only sign of surveillance I came across was just a hint of dark brown fur flitting through the woods, running parallel to me for a few miles on the south side of Forks. Quil, it looked like. He must have seen me, too, because he disappeared after a minute without raising an alarm. Again, I almost wondered what his story would be before I remembered that I didn't care.

I raced around the long U-shaped highway, heading for the biggest city I could find. That was the first part of my plan.

It seemed to take forever, probably because I was still on the razor blades, but it actually didn't even take two hours before I was driving north into the undefined sprawl that was part Tacoma and part

Seattle. I slowed down then, because I really wasn't trying to kill any innocent bystanders.

This was a stupid plan. It wasn't going to work. But, as I'd searched my head for any way at all to get away from the pain, what Leah'd said today had popped in there. That would go away, you know, if you imprinted. You wouldn't have to hurt over her anymore.

Seemed like maybe getting your choices taken away from you wasn't the very worst thing in the world. Maybe feeling like this was the very worst thing in the world. But I'd seen all the girls in La Push and up on the Makah rez and in Forks. I needed a wider hunting range.

So how do you look for a random soul mate in a crowd? Well, first, I needed a crowd. So I tooled around, looking for a likely spot. I passed a couple of malls, which probably would've been pretty good places to find girls my age, but I couldn't make myself stop. Did I want to imprint on some girl who hung out in a mall all day?

I kept going north, and it got more and more crowded. Eventually, I found a big park full of kids and families and skateboards and bikes and kites and picnics and the whole bit. I hadn't noticed till now—it was a nice day. Sun and all that. People were out celebrating the blue sky.

I parked across two handicapped spots—just begging for a ticket—and joined the crowd.

I walked around for what felt like hours. Long enough that the sun changed sides in the sky. I stared into the face of every girl who passed anywhere near me, making myself really look, noticing who was pretty and who had blue eyes and who looked good in braces and who had way too much makeup on. I tried to find something interesting about each face, so that I would know for sure that I'd really tried. Things like: This one had a really straight nose; that one should pull her hair out of her eyes; this one could do lipstick ads if the rest of her face was as perfect as her mouth. . . . Sometimes they stared back. Sometimes they looked scared—like they were thinking, Who is this big freak glaring at me? Sometimes I thought they looked kind of interested, but maybe that was just my ego running wild.

Either way, nothing. Even when I met the eyes of the girl who was—no contest—the hottest girl in the park and probably in the city, and she stared right back with a speculation that looked like interest, I felt nothing. Just the same desperate drive to find a way out of the pain.

As time went on, I started noticing all the wrong things. Bella things. This one's hair was the same color. That one's eyes were sort of shaped the same. This one's cheekbones cut across her face in just the same way. That one had the same little crease between her eyes—which made me wonder what she was worrying about. . . . That was when I gave up. Because it was beyond stupid to think that I had picked exactly the right place and time and I was

going to simply walk into my soul mate just because I was so desperate to.

It wouldn't make sense to find her here, anyway. If Sam was right, the best place to find my genetic match would be in La Push. And, clearly, no one there fit the bill. If Billy was right, then who knew? What made for a stronger wolf?

I wandered back to the car and then slumped against the hood and played with the keys. Maybe I was what Leah thought she was. Some kind of dead end that shouldn't be passed on to another generation. Or maybe it was just that my life was a big, cruel joke, and there was no escape from the punch line.

"Hey, you okay? Hello? You there, with the stolen car."

It took me a second to realize that the voice was talking to me, and then another second to decide to raise my head.

A familiar-looking girl was staring at me, her expression kind of anxious. I knew why I recognized her face—I'd already catalogued this one. Light red-gold hair, fair skin, a few gold-colored freckles sprinkled across her cheeks and nose, and eyes the color of cinnamon.

"If you're feeling that remorseful over boosting the car," she said, smiling so that a dimple popped out in her chin, "you could always turn yourself in."

"It's borrowed, not stolen," I snapped. My voice sounded horrible—like I'd been crying or something. Embarrassing.

"Sure, that'll hold up in court."

I glowered. "You need something?"

"Not really. I was kidding about the car, you know. It's just that… you look really upset about something. Oh, hey, I'm Lizzie." She held out her hand.

I looked at it until she let it fall.

"Anyway…," she said awkwardly, "I was just wondering if I could help. Seemed like you were looking for someone before." She gestured toward the park and shrugged.

"Yeah."

She waited.

I sighed. "I don't need any help. She's not here."

"Oh. Sorry."

"Me, too," I muttered.

I looked at the girl again. Lizzie. She was pretty. Nice enough to try to help a grouchy stranger who must seem nuts. Why couldn't she be the one? Why did everything have to be so freaking complicated? Nice girl, pretty, and sort of funny. Why not?

"This is a beautiful car," she said. "It's really a shame they're not making them anymore. I mean, the

Vantage's body styling is gorgeous, too, but there's just something about the Vanquish. . . ."

Nice girl who knew cars. Wow. I stared at her face harder, wishing I knew how to make it work. C'mon, Jake—imprint already.

"How's it drive?" she asked.

"Like you wouldn't believe," I told her.

She grinned her one-dimple smile, clearly pleased to have dragged a halfway civil response out of me, and I gave her a reluctant smile back.

But her smile did nothing about the sharp, cutting blades that raked up and down my body. No matter how much I wanted it to, my life was not going to come together like that.

I wasn't in that healthier place where Leah was headed. I wasn't going to be able to fall in love like a normal person. Not when I was bleeding over someone else. Maybe—if it was ten years from now and Bella's heart was long dead and I'd hauled myself through the whole grieving process and come out in one piece again—maybe then I could offer Lizzie a ride in a fast car and talk makes and models and get to know something about her and see if I liked her as a person. But that wasn't going to happen now. Magic wasn't going to save me. I was just going to have to take the torture like a man. Suck it up.

Lizzie waited, maybe hoping I was going to offer her that ride. Or maybe not.

"I'd better get this car back to the guy I borrowed it from," I muttered. She smiled again. "Glad to hear you're going straight."

"Yeah, you convinced me."

She watched me get in the car, still sort of concerned. I probably looked like someone who was about to drive off a cliff. Which maybe I would've, if that kind of move'd work for a werewolf. She waved once, her eyes trailing after the car. At first, I drove more sanely on the way back. I wasn't in a rush. I didn't want to go where I was going. Back to that house, back to that forest. Back to the pain I'd run from. Back to being absolutely alone with it.

Okay, that was melodramatic. I wouldn't be all alone, but that was a bad thing. Leah and Seth would have to suffer with me. I was glad Seth wouldn't have to suffer long. Kid didn't deserve to have his peace of mind ruined. Leah didn't, either, but at least it was something she understood. Nothing new about pain for Leah.

I sighed big as I thought about what Leah wanted from me, because I knew now that she was going to get it. I was still pissed at her, but I couldn't ignore the fact that I could make her life easier. And—now that I knew her better—I thought she would probably do this for me, if our positions were reversed.

It would be interesting, at the very least, and strange, too, to have Leah as a companion

—as a friend. We were going to get under each other's skin a lot, that was for sure. She wouldn't be one to

let me wallow, but I thought that was a good thing. I'd probably need someone to kick my butt now and then. But when it came right down to it, she was really the only friend who had any chance of understanding what I was going through now.

I thought of the hunt this morning, and how close our minds had been for that one moment in time. It hadn't been a bad thing. Different. A little scary, a little awkward. But also nice in a weird way.

I didn't have to be all alone.

And I knew Leah was strong enough to face with me the months that were coming. Months and years. It made me tired to think about it. I felt like I was staring out across an ocean that I was going to have to swim from shore to shore before I could rest again. So much time coming, and then so little time before it started. Before I was flung into that ocean. Three and a half more days, and here I was, wasting that little bit of time I had.

I started driving too fast again.

I saw Sam and Jared, one on either side of the road like sentinels, as I raced up the road toward Forks. They were well hidden in the thick branches, but I was expecting them, and I knew what to look for. I nodded as I blew past them, not bothering to wonder what they made of my day trip.

I nodded to Leah and Seth, too, as I cruised up the Cullens' driveway. It was starting to get dark, and the clouds were thick on this side of the sound, but I saw their eyes glitter in the glow of the headlights. I would

explain to them later. There'd be plenty of time for that.

It was a surprise to find Edward waiting for me in the garage. I hadn't seen him away from Bella in days. I could tell from his face that nothing bad had happened to her. In fact, he looked more peaceful than before. My stomach tightened as I remembered where that peace came from.

It was too bad that—with all my brooding—I'd forgotten to wreck the car. Oh well. I probably wouldn't have been able to stand hurting this car, anyway. Maybe he'd guessed as much, and that's why he'd lent it to me in the first place.

"A few things, Jacob," he said as soon as I cut the engine.

I took a deep breath and held it for a minute. Then, slowly, I got out of the car and threw the keys to him.

"Thanks for the loan," I said sourly. Apparently, it would have to be repaid. "What do you want now?"

"Firstly… I know how averse you are to using your authority with your pack, but . . ."

I blinked, astonished that he would even dream of starting in on this one. "What?"

"If you can't or won't control Leah, then I—"

"Leah?" I interrupted, speaking through my teeth. "What happened?"

Edward’s face was hard. “She came up to see why you’d left so abruptly. I tried to explain. I suppose it might not have come out right.”

“What did she do?”

“She phased to her human form and—”

“Really?” I interrupted again, shocked this time. I couldn’t process that. Leah letting her guard down right in the mouth of the enemy’s lair?

“She wanted to… speak to Bella.”

“To Bella?”

Edward got all hissy then. “I won’t let Bella be upset like that again. I don’t care how justified Leah thinks she is! I didn’t hurt her—of course I wouldn’t—but I’ll throw her out of the house if it happens again. I’ll launch her right across the river—”

“Hold on. What did she say?” None of this was making any sense. Edward took a deep breath, composing himself. “Leah was unnecessarily harsh. I’m not going to pretend that I understand why Bella is unable to let go of you, but I do know that she does not behave this way to hurt you. She suffers a great deal over the pain she’s inflicting on you, and on me, by asking you to stay. What Leah said was uncalled for. Bella’s been crying—”

“Wait—Leah was yelling at Bella about me?”

He nodded one sharp nod. “You were quite vehemently championed.”

Whoa. “I didn’t ask her to do that.”

“I know.”

I rolled my eyes. Of course he knew. He knew everything.

But that was really something about Leah. Who would have believed it? Leah walking into the bloodsuckers’ place human to complain about how I was being treated.

“I can’t promise to control Leah,” I told him. “I won’t do that. But I’ll talk to her, okay?

And I don’t think there’ll be a repeat. Leah’s not one to hold back, so she probably got it all off her chest today.”

“I would say so.”

“Anyway, I’ll talk to Bella about it, too. She doesn’t need to feel bad. This one’s on me.”

“I already told her that.”

“Of course you did. Is she okay?”

“She’s sleeping now. Rose is with her.”

So the psycho was “Rose” now. He’d completely crossed over to the dark side. He ignored that thought, continuing with a more complete answer to my question.

“She’s... better in some ways. Aside from Leah’s tirade and the resulting guilt.”

Better. Because Edward was hearing the monster and everything was all lovey-dovey now. Fantastic.

“It’s a bit more than that,” he murmured. “Now that I can make out the child’s thoughts, it’s apparent that he or she has remarkably developed mental facilities. He can understand us, to an extent.”

My mouth fell open. “Are you serious?”

“Yes. He seems to have a vague sense of what hurts her now. He’s trying to avoid that, as much as possible. He… loves her. Already.”

I stared at Edward, feeling sort of like my eyes might pop out of their sockets. Underneath that disbelief, I could see right away that this was the critical factor. This was what had changed Edward—that the monster had convinced him of this love. He couldn’t hate what loved Bella. It was probably why he couldn’t hate me, either. There was a big difference, though. I wasn’t killing her.

Edward went on, acting like he hadn’t heard all that. “The progress, I believe, is more than we’d judged. When Carlisle returns—”

“They’re not back?” I cut in sharply. I thought of Sam and Jared, watching the road. Would they get curious as to what was going on?

“Alice and Jasper are. Carlisle sent all the blood he was able to acquire, but it wasn’t as much as he was hoping for—Bella will use up this supply in another day the way her appetite has grown. Carlisle stayed to

try another source. I don't think that's necessary now, but he wants to be covered for any eventuality."

"Why isn't it necessary? If she needs more?"

I could tell he was watching and listening to my reaction carefully as he explained. "I'm trying to persuade Carlisle to deliver the baby as soon as he is back."

"What?"

"The child seems to be attempting to avoid rough movements, but it's difficult. He's become too big. It's madness to wait, when he's clearly developed beyond what Carlisle had guessed. Bella's too fragile to delay."

I kept getting my legs knocked out from under me. First, counting on Edward's hatred of the thing so much. Now, I'd realized that I thought of those four days as a sure thing. I'd banked on them.

The endless ocean of grief that waited stretched out before me. I tried to catch my breath.

Edward waited. I stared at his face while I recovered, recognizing another change there.

"You think she's going to make it," I whispered.

"Yes. That was the other thing I wanted to talk to you about."

I couldn't say anything. After a minute, he went on.

"Yes," he said again. "Waiting, as we have been, for the child to be ready, that was insanely dangerous. At

any moment it could have been too late. But if we're proactive about this, if we act quickly, I see no reason why it should not go well. Knowing the child's mind is unbelievably helpful. Thankfully, Bella and Rose agree with me. Now that I've convinced them it's safe for the child if we proceed, there's nothing to keep this from working."

"When will Carlisle be back?" I asked, still whispering. I hadn't got my breath back yet.

"By noon tomorrow."

My knees buckled. I had to grab the car to hold myself up. Edward reached out like he was offering support, but then he thought better of it and dropped his hands.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I am truly sorry for the pain this causes you, Jacob. Though you hate me, I must admit that I don't feel the same about you. I think of you as a… a brother in many ways. A comrade in arms, at the very least. I regret your suffering more than you realize. But Bella is going to survive"—when he said that his voice was fierce, even violent—"and I know that's what really matters to you."

He was probably right. It was hard to tell. My head was spinning.

"So I hate to do this now, while you're already dealing with too much, but, clearly, there is little time. I have to ask you for something—to beg, if I must."

"I don't have anything left," I choked out.

He lifted his hand again, as if to put it on my shoulder, but then let it drop like before and sighed.

"I know how much you have given," he said quietly. "But this is something you do have, and only you. I'm asking this of the true Alpha, Jacob. I'm asking this of Ephraim's heir."

I was way past being able to respond.

"I want your permission to deviate from what we agreed to in our treaty with Ephraim. I want you to grant us an exception. I want your permission to save her life. You know I'll do it anyway, but I don't want to break faith with you if there is any way to avoid it. We never intended to go back on our word, and we don't do it lightly now. I want your understanding, Jacob, because you know exactly why we do this. I want the alliance between our families to survive when this is over."

I tried to swallow. Sam, I thought. It's Sam you want.

"No. Sam's authority is assumed. It belongs to you. You'll never take it from him, but no one can rightfully agree to what I'm asking except for you."

It's not my decision.

"It is, Jacob, and you know it. Your word on this will condemn us or absolve us. Only you can give this to me."

I can't think. I don't know.

"We don't have much time." He glanced back toward the house.

No, there was no time. My few days had become a few hours.

I don't know. Let me think. Just give me a minute here, okay?

"Yes."

I started walking to the house, and he followed. Crazy how easy it was, walking through the dark with a vampire right beside me. It didn't feel unsafe, or even uncomfortable, really. It felt like walking next to anybody. Well, anybody who smelled bad. There was a movement in the brush at the edge of the big lawn, and then a low whimper. Seth shrugged through the ferns and loped over to us.

"Hey, kid," I muttered.

He dipped his head, and I patted his shoulder.

"S'all cool," I lied. "I'll tell you about it later. Sorry to take off on you like that."

He grinned at me.

"Hey, tell your sister to back off now, okay? Enough."

Seth nodded once.

I shoved against his shoulder this time. "Get back to work. I'll spell you in a bit."

Seth leaned against me, shoving back, and then he galloped into the trees.

"He has one of the purest, sincerest, kindest minds I've ever heard," Edward murmured when he was out of sight. "You're lucky to have his thoughts to share."

"I know that," I grunted.

We started toward the house, and both of our heads snapped up when we heard the sound of someone sucking through a straw. Edward was in a hurry then. He darted up the porch stairs and was gone.

"Bella, love, I thought you were sleeping," I heard him say. "I'm sorry, I wouldn't have left."

"Don't worry. I just got so thirsty—it woke me up. It's a good thing Carlisle is bringing more. This kid is going to need it when he gets out of me."

"True. That's a good point."

"I wonder if he'll want anything else," she mused.

"I suppose we'll find out."

I walked through the door.

Alice said, "Finally," and Bella's eyes flashed to me. That infuriating, irresistible smile broke across her face for one second. Then it faltered, and her face fell. Her lips puckered, like she was trying not to cry.

I wanted to punch Leah right in her stupid mouth.

"Hey, Bells," I said quickly. "How ya doing?"

"I'm fine," she said.

"Big day today, huh? Lots of new stuff."

“You don’t have to do that, Jacob.”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, going to sit on the arm of the sofa by her head. Edward had the floor there already.

She gave me a reproachful look. “I’m so s—” she started to say. I pinched her lips together between my thumb and finger.

“Jake,” she mumbled, trying to pull my hand away. Her attempt was so weak it was hard to believe that she was really trying.

I shook my head. “You can talk when you’re not being stupid.”

“Fine, I won’t say it,” it sounded like she mumbled.

I pulled my hand away.

“Sorry!” she finished quickly, and then grinned.

I rolled my eyes and then smiled back at her.

When I stared into her eyes, I saw everything that I’d been looking for in the park. Tomorrow, she’d be someone else. But hopefully alive, and that was what counted, right? She’d look at me with the same eyes, sort of. Smile with the same lips, almost. She’d still know me better than anyone who didn’t have full access to the inside of my head.

Leah might be an interesting companion, maybe even a true friend—someone who would stand up for me. But she wasn’t my best friend the way that Bella was.

Aside from the impossible love I felt for Bella, there was also that other bond, and it ran bone deep.

Tomorrow, she'd be my enemy. Or she'd be my ally. And, apparently, that distinction was up to me.

I sighed.

Fine! I thought, giving up the very last thing I had to give. It made me feel hollow. Go ahead. Save her. As Ephraim's heir, you have my permission, my word, that this will not violate the treaty. The others will just have to blame me. You were right—they can't deny that it's my right to agree to this.

"Thank you." Edward's whisper was low enough that Bella didn't hear anything. But the words were so fervent that, from the corner of my eye, I saw the other vampires turning to stare.

"So," Bella asked, working to be casual. "How was your day?"

"Great. Went for a drive. Hung out in the park."

"Sounds nice."

"Sure, sure."

Suddenly, she made a face. "Rose?" she asked.

I heard Blondie chuckle. "Again?"

"I think I've drunk two gallons in the last hour," Bella explained. Edward and I both got out of the way while Rosalie came to lift Bella from the couch and take her to the bathroom.

"Can I walk?" Bella asked. "My legs are so stiff."

"Are you sure?" Edward asked.

"Rose'll catch me if I trip over my feet. Which could happen pretty easily, since I can't see them."

Rosalie set Bella carefully on her feet, keeping her hands right at Bella's shoulders. Bella stretched her arms out in front of her, wincing a little.

"That feels good," she sighed. "Ugh, but I'm huge."

She really was. Her stomach was its own continent.

"One more day," she said, and patted her stomach.

I couldn't help the pain that shot through me in a sudden, stabbing burst, but I tried to keep it off my face. I could hide it for one more day, right?

"All righty, then. Whoops—oh, no!"

The cup Bella had left on the sofa tumbled to one side, the dark red blood spilling out onto the pale fabric.

Automatically, though three other hands beat her there, Bella bent over, reaching out to catch it.

There was the strangest, muffled ripping sound from the center of her body.

"Oh!" she gasped.

And then she went totally limp, slumping toward the floor. Rosalie caught her in the same instant, before she could fall. Edward was there, too, hands out, the mess on the sofa forgotten.

“Bella?” he asked, and then his eyes unfocused, and panic shot across his features. A half second later, Bella screamed.

It was not just a scream, it was a blood-curdling shriek of agony. The horrifying sound cut off with a gurgle, and her eyes rolled back into her head. Her body twitched, arched in Rosalie’s arms, and then Bella vomited a fountain of blood.

# Chapter 18

## THERE ARE NO WORDS FOR THIS.

Bella's body, streaming with red, started to twitch, jerking around in Rosalie's arms like she was being electrocuted. All the while, her face was blank—unconscious. It was the wild thrashing from inside the center of her body that moved her. As she convulsed, sharp snaps and cracks kept time with the spasms.

Rosalie and Edward were frozen for the shortest half second, and then they broke. Rosalie whipped Bella's body into her arms, and, shouting so fast it was hard to separate the individual words, she and Edward shot up the staircase to the second floor. I sprinted after them.

"Morphine!" Edward yelled at Rosalie.

"Alice—get Carlisle on the phone!" Rosalie screeched.

The room I followed them to looked like an emergency ward set up in the middle of a library. The lights were brilliant and white. Bella was on a table under the glare, skin ghostly in the spotlight. Her body flopped, a fish on the sand. Rosalie pinned Bella down, yanking and ripping her clothes out of the way, while Edward stabbed a syringe into her arm.

How many times had I imagined her naked? Now I couldn't look. I was afraid to have these memories in my head.

"What's happening, Edward?"

“He’s suffocating!”

“The placenta must have detached!”

Somewhere in this, Bella came around. She responded to their words with a shriek that clawed at my eardrums.

“Get him OUT!” she screamed. “He can’t BREATHE! Do it NOW!”

I saw the red spots pop out when her scream broke the blood vessels in her eyes.

“The morphine—,” Edward growled.

“NO! NOW—!” Another gush of blood choked off what she was shrieking. He held her head up, desperately trying to clear her mouth so that she could breathe again. Alice darted into the room and clipped a little blue earpiece under Rosalie’s hair. Then Alice backed away, her gold eyes wide and burning, while Rosalie hissed frantically into the phone.

In the bright light, Bella’s skin seemed more purple and black than it was white. Deep red was seeping beneath the skin over the huge, shuddering bulge of her stomach. Rosalie’s hand came up with a scalpel.

“Let the morphine spread!” Edward shouted at her.

“There’s no time,” Rosalie hissed. “He’s dying!”

Her hand came down on Bella’s stomach, and vivid red spouted out from where she pierced the skin. It was like a bucket being turned over, a faucet twisted

to full. Bella jerked, but didn't scream. She was still choking.

And then Rosalie lost her focus. I saw the expression on her face shift, saw her lips pull back from her teeth and her black eyes glint with thirst.

"No, Rose!" Edward roared, but his hands were trapped, trying to prop Bella upright so she could breathe.

I launched myself at Rosalie, jumping across the table without bothering to phase. As I hit her stone body, knocking her toward the door, I felt the scalpel in her hand stab deep into my left arm. My right palm smashed against her face, locking her jaw and blocking her airways.

I used my grip on Rosalie's face to swing her body out so that I could land a solid kick in her gut; it was like kicking concrete. She flew into the door frame, buckling one side of it. The little speaker in her ear crackled into pieces. Then Alice was there, yanking her by the throat to get her into the hall.

And I had to give it to Blondie—she didn't put up an ounce of fight. She wanted us to win. She let me trash her like that, to save Bella. Well, to save the thing. I ripped the blade out of my arm.

"Alice, get her out of here!" Edward shouted. "Take her to Jasper and keep her there!

Jacob, I need you!"

I didn’t watch Alice finish the job. I wheeled back to the operating table, where Bella was turning blue, her eyes wide and staring.

“CPR?” Edward growled at me, fast and demanding.

“Yes!”

I judged his face swiftly, looking for any sign that he was going to react like Rosalie. There was nothing but single-minded ferocity.

“Get her breathing! I’ve got to get him out before—”

Another shattering crack inside her body, the loudest yet, so loud that we both froze in shock waiting for her answering shriek. Nothing. Her legs, which had been curled up in agony, now went limp, sprawling out in an unnatural way.

“Her spine,” he choked in horror.

“Get it out of her!” I snarled, flinging the scalpel at him. “She won’t feel anything now!”

And then I bent over her head. Her mouth looked clear, so I pressed mine to hers and blew a lungful of air into it. I felt her twitching body expand, so there was nothing blocking her throat.

Her lips tasted like blood.

I could hear her heart, thumping unevenly. Keep it going, I thought fiercely at her, blowing another gust of air into her body. You promised. Keep your heart beating. I heard the soft, wet sound of the scalpel across her stomach. More blood dripping to the floor.

The next sound jolted through me, unexpected, terrifying. Like metal being shredded apart. The sound brought back the fight in the clearing so many months ago, the tearing sound of the newborns being ripped apart. I glanced over to see Edward's face pressed against the bulge. Vampire teeth—a surefire way to cut through vampire skin. I shuddered as I blew more air into Bella.

She coughed back at me, her eyes blinking, rolling blindly.

"You stay with me now, Bella!" I yelled at her. "Do you hear me? Stay! You're not leaving me. Keep your heart beating!"

Her eyes wheeled, looking for me, or him, but seeing nothing.

I stared into them anyway, keeping my gaze locked there.

And then her body was suddenly still under my hands, though her breathing picked up roughly and her heart continued to thud. I realized the stillness meant that it was over. The internal beating was over. It must be out of her.

It was.

Edward whispered, "Renesmee."

So Bella'd been wrong. It wasn't the boy she'd imagined. No big surprise there. What hadn't she been wrong about?

I didn't look away from her red-spotted eyes, but I felt her hands lift weakly.

"Let me…," she croaked in a broken whisper. "Give her to me."

I guess I should have known that he would always give her what she wanted, no matter how stupid her request might be. But I didn't dream he would listen to her now. So I didn't think to stop him.

Something warm touched my arm. That right there should have caught my attention. Nothing felt warm to me.

But I couldn't look away from Bella's face. She blinked and then stared, finally seeing something. She moaned out a strange, weak croon.

"Renes… mee. So… beautiful."

And then she gasped—gasped in pain.

By the time I looked, it was too late. Edward had snatched the warm, bloody thing out of her limp arms. My eyes flickered across her skin. It was red with blood—the blood that had flowed from her mouth, the blood smeared all over the creature, and fresh blood welling out of a tiny double-crescent bite mark just over her left breast.

"No, Renesmee," Edward murmured, like he was teaching the monster manners. I didn't look at him or it. I watched only Bella as her eyes rolled back into her head. With a last dull ga-lump, her heart faltered and went silent. She missed maybe half of one beat, and then my hands were on her chest, doing

compressions. I counted in my head, trying to keep the rhythm steady. One. Two. Three. Four.

Breaking away for a second, I blew another lungful of air into her. I couldn't see anymore. My eyes were wet and blurry. But I was hyperaware of the sounds in the room. The unwilling glug-glug of her heart under my demanding hands, the pounding of my own heart, and another—a fluttering beat that was too fast, too light. I couldn't place it.

I forced more air down Bella's throat.

"What are you waiting for?" I choked out breathlessly, pumping her heart again. One. Two. Three. Four.

"Take the baby," Edward said urgently.

"Throw it out the window." One. Two. Three. Four.

"Give her to me," a low voice chimed from the doorway.

Edward and I snarled at the same time.

One. Two. Three. Four.

"I've got it under control," Rosalie promised. "Give me the baby, Edward. I'll take care of her until Bella . . ."

I breathed for Bella again while the exchange took place. The fluttering thumpa- thumpa-thumpa faded away with distance.

"Move your hands, Jacob."

I looked up from Bella's white eyes, still pumping her heart for her. Edward had a syringe in his hand—all silver, like it was made from steel.

"What's that?"

His stone hand knocked mine out of the way. There was a tiny crunch as his blow broke my little finger. In the same second, he shoved the needle straight into her heart.

"My venom," he answered as he pushed the plunger down.

I heard the jolt in her heart, like he'd shocked her with paddles.

"Keep it moving," he ordered. His voice was ice, was dead. Fierce and unthinking. Like he was a machine.

I ignored the healing ache in my finger and started pumping her heart again. It was harder, as if her blood was congealing there—thicker and slower. While I pushed the now-viscous blood through her arteries, I watched what he was doing. It was like he was kissing her, brushing his lips at her throat, at her wrists, into the crease at the inside of her arm. But I could hear the lush tearing of her skin as his teeth bit through, again and again, forcing venom into her system at as many points as possible. I saw his pale tongue sweep along the bleeding gashes, but before this could make me either sick or angry, I realized what he was doing. Where his tongue washed the venom over her skin, it sealed shut. Holding the poison and the blood inside her body.

I blew more air into her mouth, but there was nothing there. Just the lifeless rise of her chest in response. I kept pumping her heart, counting, while he worked manically over her, trying to put her back together. All the king's horses and all the king's men…

But there was nothing there, just me, just him.

Working over a corpse.

Because that's all that was left of the girl we both loved. This broken, bled-out, mangled corpse. We couldn't put Bella together again.

I knew it was too late. I knew she was dead. I knew it for sure because the pull was gone. I didn't feel any reason to be here beside her. She wasn't here anymore. So this body had no more draw for me. The senseless need to be near her had vanished. Or maybe moved was the better word. It seemed like I felt the pull from the opposite direction now. From down the stairs, out the door. The longing to get away from here and never, ever come back.

"Go, then," he snapped, and he hit my hands out of the way again, taking my place this time. Three fingers broken, it felt like.

I straightened them numbly, not minding the throb of pain.

He pushed her dead heart faster than I had.

"She's not dead," he growled. "She's going to be fine."

I wasn't sure he was talking to me anymore.

Turning away, leaving him with his dead, I walked slowly to the door. So slowly. I couldn't make my feet move faster.

This was it, then. The ocean of pain. The other shore so far away across the boiling water that I couldn't imagine it, much less see it.

I felt empty again, now that I'd lost my purpose. Saving Bella had been my fight for so long now. And she wouldn't be saved. She'd willingly sacrificed herself to be torn apart by that monster's young, and so the fight was lost. It was all over. I shuddered at the sound coming from behind me as I plodded down the stairs—the sound of a dead heart being forced to thud.

I wanted to somehow pour bleach inside my head and let it fry my brain. To burn away the images left from Bella's final minutes. I'd take the brain damage if I could get rid of that—the screaming, the bleeding, the unbearable crunching and snapping as the newborn monster tore through her from the inside out. . . .

I wanted to sprint away, to take the stairs ten at a time and race out the door, but my feet were heavy as iron and my body was more tired than it had ever been before. I shuffled down the stairs like a crippled old man.

I rested at the bottom step, gathering my strength to get out the door. Rosalie was on the clean end of the white sofa, her back to me, cooing and murmuring to the blanket-wrapped thing in her arms. She must have heard me pause, but she ignored me, caught up in her moment of stolen motherhood. Maybe she

would be happy now. Rosalie had what she wanted, and Bella would never come to take the creature from her. I wondered if that's what the poisonous blonde had been hoping for all along. She held something dark in her hands, and there was a greedy sucking sound coming from the tiny murderer she held.

The scent of blood in the air. Human blood. Rosalie was feeding it. Of course it would want blood. What else would you feed the kind of monster that would brutally mutilate its own mother? It might as well have been drinking Bella's blood. Maybe it was. My strength came back to me as I listened to the sound of the little executioner feeding. Strength and hate and heat—red heat washing through my head, burning but erasing nothing. The images in my head were fuel, building up the inferno but refusing to be consumed. I felt the tremors rock me from head to toe, and I did not try to stop them. Rosalie was totally absorbed in the creature, paying no attention to me at all. She wouldn't be quick enough to stop me, distracted as she was.

Sam had been right. The thing was an aberration—its existence went against nature. A black, soulless demon. Something that had no right to be.

Something that had to be destroyed.

It seemed like the pull had not been leading to the door after all. I could feel it now, encouraging me, tugging me forward. Pushing me to finish this, to cleanse the world of this abomination.

Rosalie would try to kill me when the creature was dead, and I would fight back. I wasn't sure if I would

have time to finish her before the others came to help. Maybe, maybe not. I didn't much care either way.

I didn't care if the wolves, either set, avenged me or called the Cullens' justice fair. None of that mattered. All I cared about was my own justice. My revenge. The thing that had killed Bella would not live another minute longer.

If Bella'd survived, she would have hated me for this. She would have wanted to kill me personally.

But I didn't care. She didn't care what she had done to me—letting herself be slaughtered like an animal. Why should I take her feelings into account?

And then there was Edward. He must be too busy now—too far gone in his insane denial, trying to reanimate a corpse—to listen to my plans.

So I wouldn't get the chance to keep my promise to him, unless—and it was not a wager I'd put money on—I managed to win the fight against Rosalie, Jasper, and Alice, three on one. But even if I did win, I didn't think I had it in me to kill Edward. Because I didn't have enough compassion for that. Why should I let him get away from what he'd done? Wouldn't it be more fair—more satisfying—to let him live with nothing, nothing at all?

It made me almost smile, as filled with hate as I was, to imagine it. No Bella. No killer spawn. And also missing as many members of his family as I was able to take down. Of course, he could probably put those back together, since I wouldn't be around to burn them. Unlike Bella, who would never be whole again.

I wondered if the creature could be put back together. I doubted it. It was part Bella, too

—so it must have inherited some of her vulnerability. I could hear that in the tiny, thrumming beat of its heart.

Its heart was beating. Hers wasn't.

Only a second had passed as I made these easy decisions.

The trembling was getting tighter and faster. I coiled myself, preparing to spring at the blond vampire and rip the murderous thing from her arms with my teeth. Rosalie cooed at the creature again, setting the empty metal bottle-thing aside and lifting the creature into the air to nuzzle her face against its cheek. Perfect. The new position was perfect for my strike. I leaned forward and felt the heat begin to change me while the pull toward the killer grew—it was stronger than I'd ever felt it before, so strong it reminded me of an Alpha's command, like it would crush me if I didn't obey.

This time I wanted to obey.

The murderer stared past Rosalie's shoulder at me, its gaze more focused than any newborn creature's gaze should be.

Warm brown eyes, the color of milk chocolate—the exact same color that Bella's had been.

My shaking jerked to a stop; heat flooded through me, stronger than before, but it was a new kind of heat—not a burning.

It was a glowing.

Everything inside me came undone as I stared at the tiny porcelain face of the halfvampire, half-human baby. All the lines that held me to my life were sliced apart in swift cuts, like clipping the strings to a bunch of balloons. Everything that made me who I was—my love for the dead girl upstairs, my love for my father, my loyalty to my new pack, the love for my other brothers, my hatred for my enemies, my home, my name, my self—disconnected from me in that second— snip, snip, snip—and floated up into space.

I was not left drifting. A new string held me where I was.

Not one string, but a million. Not strings, but steel cables. A million steel cables all tying me to one thing—to the very center of the universe.

I could see that now—how the universe swirled around this one point. I'd never seen the symmetry of the universe before, but now it was plain.

The gravity of the earth no longer tied me to the place where I stood. It was the baby girl in the blond vampire's arms that held me here now. Renesmee.

From upstairs, there was a new sound. The only sound that could touch me in this endless instant.

A frantic pounding, a racing beat…

A changing heart.

# BOOK THREE

*Bella*

Personal affection is a luxury you can have only after all your enemies are eliminated. Until then, everyone you love is a hostage, sapping your courage and corrupting your judgment.

Orson Scott Card

Empire

# Preface

No longer just a nightmare, the line of black advanced on us through the icy mist stirred up by their feet.

We're going to die, I thought in panic. I was desperate for the precious one I guarded, but even to think of that was a lapse in attention I could not afford. They ghosted closer, their dark robes billowing slightly with the movement. I saw their hands curl into bone-colored claws. They drifted apart, angling to come at us from all sides. We were outnumbered. It was over.

And then, like a burst of light from a flash, the whole scene was different. Yet nothing changed—the Volturi still stalked toward us, poised to kill. All that really changed was how the picture looked to me. Suddenly, I was hungry for it. I wanted them to charge. The panic changed to bloodlust as I crouched forward, a smile on my face, and a growl ripped through my bared teeth.

# Chapter 19

## BURNING

The pain was bewildering.

Exactly that—I was bewildered. I couldn't understand, couldn't make sense of what was happening.

My body tried to reject the pain, and I was sucked again and again into a blackness that cut out whole seconds or maybe even minutes of the agony, making it that much harder to keep up with reality.

I tried to separate them.

Non-reality was black, and it didn't hurt so much.

Reality was red, and it felt like I was being sawed in half, hit by a bus, punched by a prize fighter, trampled by bulls, and submerged in acid, all at the same time. Reality was feeling my body twist and flip when I couldn't possibly move because of the pain.

Reality was knowing there was something so much more important than all this torture, and not being able to remember what it was.

Reality had come on so fast.

One moment, everything was as it should have been. Surrounded by people I loved. Smiles. Somehow, unlikely as it was, it seemed like I was about to get everything I'd been fighting for.

And then one tiny, inconsequential thing had gone wrong.

I'd watched as my cup tilted, dark blood spilling out and staining the perfect white, and I'd lurched toward the accident reflexively. I'd seen the other, faster hands, but my body had continued to reach, to stretch. . . .

Inside me, something had yanked the opposite direction.

Ripping. Breaking. Agony.

The darkness had taken over, and then washed away to a wave of torture. I couldn't breathe—I had drowned once before, and this was different; it was too hot in my throat. Pieces of me shattering, snapping, slicing apart. . . .

More blackness.

Voices, this time, shouting, as the pain came back.

"The placenta must have detached!"

Something sharper than knives ripped through me—the words, making sense in spite of the other tortures. Detached placenta—I knew what that meant. It meant that my baby was dying inside me.

"Get him out!" I screamed to Edward. Why hadn't he done it yet? "He can't breathe! Do it now!"

"The morphine—"

He wanted to wait, to give me painkillers, while our baby was dying?!

“No! Now—,” I choked, unable to finish.

Black spots covered the light in the room as a cold point of new pain stabbed icily into my stomach. It felt wrong—I struggled automatically to protect my womb, my baby, my little Edward Jacob, but I was weak. My lungs ached, oxygen burned away. The pain faded away again, though I clung to it now. My baby, my baby, dying. . . . How long had passed? Seconds or minutes? The pain was gone. Numb. I couldn’t feel. I still couldn’t see, either, but I could hear. There was air in my lungs again, scraping in rough bubbles up and down my throat.

“You stay with me now, Bella! Do you hear me? Stay! You’re not leaving me. Keep your heart beating!”

Jacob? Jacob, still here, still trying to save me.

Of course, I wanted to tell him. Of course I would keep my heart beating. Hadn’t I promised them both?

I tried to feel my heart, to find it, but I was so lost inside my own body. I couldn’t feel the things I should, and nothing felt in the right place. I blinked and I found my eyes. I could see the light. Not what I was looking for, but better than nothing. As my eyes struggled to adjust, Edward whispered, “Renesmee.”

Renesmee?

Not the pale and perfect son of my imagination? I felt a moment of shock. And then a flood of warmth.

Renesmee.

I willed my lips to move, willed the bubbles of air to turn into whispers on my tongue. I forced my numb hands to reach.

"Let me… Give her to me."

The light danced, shattering off Edward's crystal hands. The sparkles were tinged with red, with the blood that covered his skin. And more red in his hands. Something small and struggling, dripping with blood. He touched the warm body to my weak arms, almost like I was holding her. Her wet skin was hot—as hot as Jacob's. My eyes focused; suddenly everything was absolutely clear.

Renesmee did not cry, but she breathed in quick, startled pants. Her eyes were open, her expression so shocked it was almost funny. The little, perfectly round head was covered in a thick layer of matted, bloody curls. Her irises were a familiar—but astonishing—

chocolate brown. Under the blood, her skin looked pale, a creamy ivory. All besides her cheeks, which flamed with color.

Her tiny face was so absolutely perfect that it stunned me. She was even more beautiful than her father. Unbelievable. Impossible.

"Renesmee," I whispered. "So… beautiful."

The impossible face suddenly smiled—a wide, deliberate smile. Behind the shell-pink lips was a full complement of snowy milk teeth.

She leaned her head down, against my chest, burrowing against the warmth. Her skin was warm and silky, but it didn't give the way mine did.

Then there was pain again—just one warm slash of it. I gasped.

And she was gone. My angel-faced baby was nowhere. I couldn't see or feel her. No! I wanted to shout. Give her back to me!

But the weakness was too much. My arms felt like empty rubber hoses for a moment, and then they felt like nothing at all. I couldn't feel them. I couldn't feel me. The blackness rushed over my eyes more solidly than before. Like a thick blindfold, firm and fast. Covering not just my eyes but also my self with a crushing weight. It was exhausting to push against it. I knew it would be so much easier to give in. To let the blackness push me down, down, down to a place where there was no pain and no weariness and no worry and no fear.

If it had only been for myself, I wouldn't have been able to struggle very long. I was only human, with no more than human strength. I'd been trying to keep up with the supernatural for too long, like Jacob had said.

But this wasn't just about me.

If I did the easy thing now, let the black nothingness erase me, I would hurt them. Edward. Edward. My life and his were twisted into a single strand. Cut one, and you cut both. If he were gone, I would not be able to live through that. If I were gone, he wouldn't live

through it, either. And a world without Edward seemed completely pointless. Edward had to exist.

Jacob—who'd said goodbye to me over and over but kept coming back when I needed him. Jacob, who I'd wounded so many times it was criminal. Would I hurt him again, the worst way yet? He'd stayed for me, despite everything. Now all he asked was that I stay for him.

But it was so dark here that I couldn't see either of their faces. Nothing seemed real. That made it hard not to give up.

I kept pushing against the black, though, almost a reflex. I wasn't trying to lift it. I was just resisting. Not allowing it to crush me completely. I wasn't Atlas, and the black felt as heavy as a planet; I couldn't shoulder it. All I could do was not be entirely obliterated.

It was sort of the pattern to my life—I'd never been strong enough to deal with the things outside my control, to attack the enemies or outrun them. To avoid the pain. Always human and weak, the only thing I'd ever been able to do was keep going. Endure. Survive.

It had been enough up to this point. It would have to be enough today. I would endure this until help came.

I knew Edward would be doing everything he could. He would not give up. Neither would I.

I held the blackness of nonexistence at bay by inches.

It wasn't enough, though—that determination. As the time ground on and on and the darkness gained by

tiny eighths and sixteenths of my inches, I needed something more to draw strength from.

I couldn't pull even Edward's face into view. Not Jacob's, not Alice's or Rosalie's or Charlie's or Renée's or Carlisle's or Esme's… Nothing. It terrified me, and I wondered if it was too late.

I felt myself slipping—there was nothing to hold on to.

No! I had to survive this. Edward was depending on me. Jacob. Charlie Alice Rosalie Carlisle Renée Esme…

Renesmee.

And then, though I still couldn't see anything, suddenly I could feel something. Like phantom limbs, I imagined I could feel my arms again. And in them, something small and hard and very, very warm.

My baby. My little nudger.

I had done it. Against the odds, I had been strong enough to survive Renesmee, to hold on to her until she was strong enough to live without me.

That spot of heat in my phantom arms felt so real. I clutched it closer. It was exactly where my heart should be. Holding tight the warm memory of my daughter, I knew that I would be able to fight the darkness as long as I needed to.

The warmth beside my heart got more and more real, warmer and warmer. Hotter. The heat was so real it was hard to believe that I was imagining it. Hotter.

Uncomfortable now. Too hot. Much, much too hot.

Like grabbing the wrong end of a curling iron—my automatic response was to drop the scorching thing in my arms. But there was nothing in my arms. My arms were not curled to my chest. My arms were dead things lying somewhere at my side. The heat was inside me.

The burning grew—rose and peaked and rose again until it surpassed anything I'd ever felt.

I felt the pulse behind the fire raging now in my chest and realized that I'd found my heart again, just in time to wish I never had. To wish that I'd embraced the blackness while I'd still had the chance. I wanted to raise my arms and claw my chest open and rip the heart from it—anything to get rid of this torture. But I couldn't feel my arms, couldn't move one vanished finger.

James, snapping my leg under his foot. That was nothing. That was a soft place to rest on a feather bed. I'd take that now, a hundred times. A hundred snaps. I'd take it and be grateful.

The baby, kicking my ribs apart, breaking her way through me piece by piece. That was nothing. That was floating in a pool of cool water. I'd take it a thousand times. Take it and be grateful.

The fire blazed hotter and I wanted to scream. To beg for someone to kill me now, before I lived one more second in this pain. But I couldn't move my lips. The weight was still there, pressing on me.

I realized it wasn't the darkness holding me down; it was my body. So heavy. Burying me in the flames that were chewing their way out from my heart now, spreading with impossible pain through my shoulders and stomach, scalding their way up my throat, licking at my face.

Why couldn't I move? Why couldn't I scream? This wasn't part of the stories. My mind was unbearably clear—sharpened by the fierce pain—and I saw the answer almost as soon as I could form the questions.

The morphine.

It seemed like a million deaths ago that we'd discussed it—Edward, Carlisle, and I. Edward and Carlisle had hoped that enough painkillers would help fight the pain of the venom. Carlisle had tried with Emmett, but the venom had burned ahead of the medicine, sealing his veins. There hadn't been time for it to spread. I'd kept my face smooth and nodded and thanked my rarely lucky stars that Edward could not read my mind.

Because I'd had morphine and venom together in my system before, and I knew the truth. I knew the numbness of the medicine was completely irrelevant while the venom seared through my veins. But there'd been no way I was going to mention that fact. Nothing that would make him more unwilling to change me.

I hadn't guessed that the morphine would have this effect—that it would pin me down and gag me. Hold me paralyzed while I burned.

I knew all the stories. I knew that Carlisle had kept quiet enough to avoid discovery while he burned. I knew that, according to Rosalie, it did no good to scream. And I'd hoped that maybe I could be like Carlisle. That I would believe Rosalie's words and keep my mouth shut. Because I knew that every scream that escaped my lips would torment Edward.

Now it seemed like a hideous joke that I was getting my wish fulfilled. If I couldn't scream, how could I tell them to kill me?

All I wanted was to die. To never have been born. The whole of my existence did not outweigh this pain. Wasn't worth living through it for one more heartbeat. Let me die, let me die, let me die.

And, for a never-ending space, that was all there was. Just the fiery torture, and my soundless shrieks, pleading for death to come. Nothing else, not even time. So that made it infinite, with no beginning and no end. One infinite moment of pain. The only change came when suddenly, impossibly, my pain was doubled. The lower half of my body, deadened since before the morphine, was suddenly on fire, too. Some broken connection had been healed—knitted together by the scorching fingers of the flame.

The endless burn raged on.

It could have been seconds or days, weeks or years, but, eventually, time came to mean something again.

Three things happened together, grew from each other so that I didn't know which came first: time restarted, the morphine's weight faded, and I got stronger. I

could feel the control of my body come back to me in increments, and those increments were my first markers of the time passing. I knew it when I was able to twitch my toes and twist my fingers into fists. I knew it, but I did not act on it. Though the fire did not decrease one tiny degree—in fact, I began to develop a new capacity for experiencing it, a new sensitivity to appreciate, separately, each blistering tongue of flame that licked through my veins—I discovered that I could think around it. I could remember why I shouldn't scream. I could remember the reason why I'd committed to enduring this unendurable agony. I could remember that, though it felt impossible now, there was something that might be worth the torture. This happened just in time for me to hold on when the weights left my body. To anyone watching me, there would be no change. But for me, as I struggled to keep the screams and thrashing locked up inside my body, where they couldn't hurt anyone else, it felt like I'd gone from being tied to the stake as I burned, to gripping that stake to hold myself in the fire.

I had just enough strength to lie there unmoving while I was charred alive. My hearing got clearer and clearer, and I could count the frantic, pounding beats of my heart to mark the time.

I could count the shallow breaths that gasped through my teeth. I could count the low, even breaths that came from somewhere close beside me. These moved slowest, so I concentrated on them. They meant the most time passing. More even than a

clock's pendulum, those breaths pulled me through the burning seconds toward the end.

I continued to get stronger, my thoughts clearer. When new noises came, I could listen. There were light footsteps, the whisper of air stirred by an opening door. The footsteps got closer, and I felt pressure against the inside of my wrist. I couldn't feel the coolness of the fingers. The fire blistered away every memory of cool.

"Still no change?"

"None."

The lightest pressure, breath against my scorched skin.

"There's no scent of the morphine left."

"I know."

"Bella? Can you hear me?"

I knew, beyond all doubt, that if I unlocked my teeth I would lose it—I would shriek and screech and writhe and thrash. If I opened my eyes, if I so much as twitched a finger—any change at all would be the end of my control.

"Bella? Bella, love? Can you open your eyes? Can you squeeze my hand?"

Pressure on my fingers. It was harder not to answer this voice, but I stayed paralyzed. I knew that the pain in his voice now was nothing compared to what

it could be. Right now he only feared that I was suffering.

“Maybe… Carlisle, maybe I was too late.” His voice was muffled; it broke on the word late.

My resolve wavered for a second.

“Listen to her heart, Edward. It’s stronger than even Emmett’s was. I’ve never heard anything so vital. She’ll be perfect.”

Yes, I was right to keep quiet. Carlisle would reassure him. He didn’t need to suffer with me.

“And her—her spine?”

“Her injuries weren’t so much worse than Esme’s. The venom will heal her as it did Esme.”

“But she’s so still. I must have done something wrong.”

“Or something right, Edward. Son, you did everything I could have and more. I’m not sure I would have had the persistence, the faith it took to save her. Stop berating yourself. Bella is going to be fine.”

A broken whisper. “She must be in agony.”

“We don’t know that. She had so much morphine in her system. We don’t know the effect that will have on her experience.”

Faint pressure inside the crease of my elbow. Another whisper. “Bella, I love you. Bella, I’m sorry.”

I wanted so much to answer him, but I wouldn't make his pain worse. Not while I had the strength to hold myself still.

Through all this, the racking fire went right on burning me. But there was so much space in my head now. Room to ponder their conversation, room to remember what had happened, room to look ahead to the future, with still endless room left over to suffer in. Also room to worry.

Where was my baby? Why wasn't she here? Why weren't they talking about her?

"No, I'm staying right here," Edward whispered, answering an unspoken thought.

"They'll sort it out."

"An interesting situation," Carlisle responded. "And I'd thought I'd seen just about everything."

"I'll deal with it later. We'll deal with it." Something pressed softly to my blistering palm.

"I'm sure, between the five of us, we can keep it from turning into bloodshed."

Edward sighed. "I don't know which side to take. I'd love to flog them both. Well, later."

"I wonder what Bella will think—whose side she'll take," Carlisle mused. One low, strained chuckle. "I'm sure she'll surprise me. She always does."

Carlisle's footsteps faded away again, and I was frustrated that there was no further explanation. Were they talking so mysteriously just to annoy me?

I went back to counting Edward's breaths to mark the time.

Ten thousand, nine hundred forty-three breaths later, a different set of footsteps whispered into the room. Lighter. More… rhythmic.

Strange that I could distinguish the minute differences between footsteps that I'd never been able to hear at all before today.

"How much longer?" Edward asked.

"It won't be long now," Alice told him. "See how clear she's becoming? I can see her so much better." She sighed.

"Still feeling a little bitter?"

"Yes, thanks so much for bringing it up," she grumbled. "You would be mortified, too, if you realized that you were handcuffed by your own nature. I see vampires best, because I am one; I see humans okay, because I was one. But I can't see these odd halfbreeds at all because they're nothing I've experienced. Bah!"

"Focus, Alice."

"Right. Bella's almost too easy to see now."

There was a long moment of silence, and then Edward sighed. It was a new sound, happier.

"She's really going to be fine," he breathed.

"Of course she is."

"You weren't so sanguine two days ago."

"I couldn't see right two days ago. But now that she's free of all the blind spots, it's a piece of cake."

"Could you concentrate for me? On the clock—give me an estimate."

Alice sighed. "So impatient. Fine. Give me a sec—"

Quiet breathing.

"Thank you, Alice." His voice was brighter.

How long? Couldn't they at least say it aloud for me? Was that too much to ask? How many more seconds would I burn? Ten thousand? Twenty? Another day—eighty-six thousand, four hundred? More than that?

"She's going to be dazzling."

Edward growled quietly. "She always has been."

Alice snorted. "You know what I mean. Look at her."

Edward didn't answer, but Alice's words gave me hope that maybe I didn't resemble the charcoal briquette I felt like. It seemed as if I must be just a pile of charred bones by now. Every cell in my body had been razed to ash.

I heard Alice breeze out of the room. I heard the swish of the fabric she moved, rubbing against itself. I heard the quiet buzz of the light hanging from the ceiling. I heard the faint wind brushing against the outside of

the house. I could hear everything. Downstairs, someone was watching a ball game. The Mariners were winning by two runs.

“It’s my turn,” I heard Rosalie snap at someone, and there was a low snarl in response.

“Hey, now,” Emmett cautioned.

Someone hissed.

I listened for more, but there was nothing but the game. Baseball was not interesting enough to distract me from the pain, so I listened to Edward’s breathing again, counting the seconds.

Twenty-one thousand, nine hundred seventeen and a half seconds later, the pain changed.

On the good-news side of things, it started to fade from my fingertips and toes. Fading slowly, but at least it was doing something new. This had to be it. The pain was on its way out….

And then the bad news. The fire in my throat wasn’t the same as before. I wasn’t only on fire, but I was now parched, too. Dry as bone. So thirsty. Burning fire, and burning thirst…

Also bad news: The fire inside my heart got hotter.

How was that possible?

My heartbeat, already too fast, picked up—the fire drove its rhythm to a new frantic pace.

"Carlisle," Edward called. His voice was low but clear. I knew that Carlisle would hear it, if he were in or near the house.

The fire retreated from my palms, leaving them blissfully pain-free and cool. But it retreated to my heart, which blazed hot as the sun and beat at a furious new speed. Carlisle entered the room, Alice at his side. Their footsteps were so distinct, I could even tell that Carlisle was on the right, and a foot ahead of Alice.

"Listen," Edward told them.

The loudest sound in the room was my frenzied heart, pounding to the rhythm of the fire.

"Ah," Carlisle said. "It's almost over."

My relief at his words was overshadowed by the excruciating pain in my heart. My wrists were free, though, and my ankles. The fire was totally extinguished there.

"Soon," Alice agreed eagerly. "I'll get the others. Should I have Rosalie… ?"

"Yes—keep the baby away."

What? No. No! What did he mean, keep my baby away? What was he thinking?

My fingers twitched—the irritation breaking through my perfect façade. The room went silent besides the jack-hammering of my heart as they all stopped breathing for a second in response.

A hand squeezed my wayward fingers. “Bella? Bella, love?”

Could I answer him without screaming? I considered that for a moment, and then the fire ripped hotter still through my chest, draining in from my elbows and knees. Better not to chance it.

“I’ll bring them right up,” Alice said, an urgent edge to her tone, and I heard the swish of wind as she darted away.

And then— oh!

My heart took off, beating like helicopter blades, the sound almost a single sustained note; it felt like it would grind through my ribs. The fire flared up in the center of my chest, sucking the last remnants of the flames from the rest of my body to fuel the most scorching blaze yet. The pain was enough to stun me, to break through my iron grip on the stake. My back arched, bowed as if the fire was dragging me upward by my heart. I allowed no other piece of my body to break rank as my torso slumped back to the table.

It became a battle inside me—my sprinting heart racing against the attacking fire. Both were losing. The fire was doomed, having consumed everything that was combustible; my heart galloped toward its last beat.

The fire constricted, concentrating inside that one remaining human organ with a final, unbearable surge. The surge was answered by a deep, hollow-sounding thud. My heart stuttered twice, and then

thudded quietly again just once more. There was no sound. No breathing. Not even mine.

For a moment, the absence of pain was all I could comprehend.

And then I opened my eyes and gazed above me in wonder.

# Chapter 20
## NEW

Everything was so clear.

Sharp. Defined.

The brilliant light overhead was still blinding-bright, and yet I could plainly see the glowing strands of the filaments inside the bulb. I could see each color of the rainbow in the white light, and, at the very edge of the spectrum, an eighth color I had no name for. Behind the light, I could distinguish the individual grains in the dark wood ceiling above. In front of it, I could see the dust motes in the air, the sides the light touched, and the dark sides, distinct and separate. They spun like little planets, moving around each other in a celestial dance.

The dust was so beautiful that I inhaled in shock; the air whistled down my throat, swirling the motes into a vortex. The action felt wrong. I considered, and realized the problem was that there was no relief tied to the action. I didn't need the air. My lungs weren't waiting for it. They reacted indifferently to the influx. I did not need the air, but I liked it. In it, I could taste the room around me—taste the lovely dust motes, the mix of the stagnant air mingling with the flow of slightly cooler air from the open door. Taste a lush whiff of silk. Taste a faint hint of something warm and desirable, something that should be moist, but wasn't.... That smell made my throat burn dryly, a faint echo of the venom burn, though the scent was tainted by the bite of chlorine and ammonia. And

most of all, I could taste an almost-honey-lilac-and-sunflavored scent that was the strongest thing, the closest thing to me. I heard the sound of the others, breathing again now that I did. Their breath mixed with the scent that was something just off honey and lilac and sunshine, bringing new flavors. Cinnamon, hyacinth, pear, seawater, rising bread, pine, vanilla, leather, apple, moss, lavender, chocolate.... I traded a dozen different comparisons in my mind, but none of them fit exactly. So sweet and pleasant.

The TV downstairs had been muted, and I heard someone—Rosalie?—shift her weight on the first floor.

I also heard a faint, thudding rhythm, with a voice shouting angrily to the beat. Rap music? I was mystified for a moment, and then the sound faded away like a car passing by with the windows rolled down.

With a start, I realized that this could be exactly right. Could I hear all the way to the freeway?

I didn't realize someone was holding my hand until whoever it was squeezed it lightly. Like it had before to hide the pain, my body locked down again in surprise. This was not a touch I expected. The skin was perfectly smooth, but it was the wrong temperature. Not cold.

After that first frozen second of shock, my body responded to the unfamiliar touch in a way that shocked me even more.

Air hissed up my throat, spitting through my clenched teeth with a low, menacing sound like a

swarm of bees. Before the sound was out, my muscles bunched and arched, twisting away from the unknown. I flipped off my back in a spin so fast it should have turned the room into an incomprehensible blur—but it did not. I saw every dust mote, every splinter in the wood-paneled walls, every loose thread in microscopic detail as my eyes whirled past them.

So by the time I found myself crouched against the wall defensively—about a sixteenth of a second later—I already understood what had startled me, and that I had overreacted.

Oh. Of course. Edward wouldn't feel cold to me. We were the same temperature now. I held my pose for an eighth of a second longer, adjusting to the scene before me. Edward was leaning across the operating table that had been my pyre, his hand reached out toward me, his expression anxious.

Edward's face was the most important thing, but my peripheral vision catalogued everything else, just in case. Some instinct to defend had been triggered, and I automatically searched for any sign of danger.

My vampire family waited cautiously against the far wall by the door, Emmett and Jasper in the front. Like there was danger. My nostrils flared, searching for the threat. I could smell nothing out of place. That faint scent of something delicious—but marred by harsh chemicals—tickled my throat again, setting it to aching and burning. Alice was peeking around Jasper's elbow with a huge grin on her face; the light sparkled off her teeth, another eight-color rainbow.

That grin reassured me and then put the pieces together. Jasper and Emmett were in the front to protect the others, as I had assumed. What I hadn't grasped immediately was that I was the danger.

All this was a sideline. The greater part of my senses and my mind were still focused on Edward's face.

I had never seen it before this second.

How many times had I stared at Edward and marveled over his beauty? How many hours—days, weeks—of my life had I spent dreaming about what I then deemed to be perfection? I thought I'd known his face better than my own. I'd thought this was the one sure physical thing in my whole world: the flawlessness of Edward's face. I may as well have been blind.

For the first time, with the dimming shadows and limiting weakness of humanity taken off my eyes, I saw his face. I gasped and then struggled with my vocabulary, unable to find the right words. I needed better words.

At this point, the other part of my attention had ascertained that there was no danger here besides myself, and I automatically straightened out of my crouch; almost a whole second had passed since I'd been on the table.

I was momentarily preoccupied by the way my body moved. The instant I'd considered standing erect, I was already straight. There was no brief fragment of time in which the action occurred; change was instantaneous, almost as if there was no movement at

all. I continued to stare at Edward's face, motionless again.

He moved slowly around the table—each step taking nearly half a second, each step flowing sinuously like river water weaving over smooth stones—his hand still outstretched.

I watched the grace of his advance, absorbing it with my new eyes.

"Bella?" he asked in a low, calming tone, but the worry in his voice layered my name with tension.

I could not answer immediately, lost as I was in the velvet folds of his voice. It was the most perfect symphony, a symphony in one instrument, an instrument more profound than any created by man. . . .

"Bella, love? I'm sorry, I know it's disorienting. But you're all right. Everything is fine."

Everything? My mind spun out, spiraling back to my last human hour. Already, the memory seemed dim, like I was watching through a thick, dark veil—because my human eyes had been half blind. Everything had been so blurred. When he said everything was fine, did that include Renesmee? Where was she? With Rosalie? I tried to remember her face—I knew that she had been beautiful—but it was irritating to try to see through the human memories. Her face was shrouded in darkness, so poorly lit. . . .

What about Jacob? Was he fine? Did my long-suffering best friend hate me now? Had he gone back to Sam's pack? Seth and Leah, too?

Were the Cullens safe, or had my transformation ignited the war with the pack? Did Edward's blanket assurance cover all of that? Or was he just trying to calm me?

And Charlie? What would I tell him now? He must have called while I was burning. What had they told him? What did he think had happened to me?

As I deliberated for one small piece of a second over which question to ask first, Edward reached out tentatively and stroked his fingertips across my cheek. Smooth as satin, soft as a feather, and now exactly matched to the temperature of my skin. His touch seemed to sweep beneath the surface of my skin, right through the bones of my face. The feeling was tingly, electric—it jolted through my bones, down my spine, and trembled in my stomach.

Wait, I thought as the trembling blossomed into a warmth, a yearning. Wasn't I supposed to lose this? Wasn't giving up this feeling a part of the bargain?

I was a newborn vampire. The dry, scorching ache in my throat gave proof to that. And I knew what being a newborn entailed. Human emotions and longings would come back to me later in some form, but I'd accepted that I would not feel them in the beginning. Only thirst. That was the deal, the price. I'd agreed to pay it. But as Edward's hand curled to the shape of my face like satin-covered steel, desire raced through my dried-out veins, singing from my scalp to my toes.

He arched one perfect eyebrow, waiting for me to speak.

I threw my arms around him.

Again, it was like there was no movement. One moment I stood straight and still as a statue; in the same instant, he was in my arms.

Warm—or at least, that was my perception. With the sweet, delicious scent that I'd never been able to really take in with my dull human senses, but that was one hundred percent Edward. I pressed my face into his smooth chest.

And then he shifted his weight uncomfortably. Leaned away from my embrace. I stared up at his face, confused and frightened by the rejection.

"Um… carefully, Bella. Ow."

I yanked my arms away, folding them behind my back as soon as I understood. I was too strong.

"Oops," I mouthed.

He smiled the kind of smile that would have stopped my heart if it were still beating.

"Don't panic, love," he said, lifting his hand to touch my lips, parted in horror. "You're just a bit stronger than I am for the moment."

My eyebrows pushed together. I'd known this, too, but it felt more surreal than any other part of this ultimately surreal moment. I was stronger than Edward. I'd made him say ow.

His hand stroked my cheek again, and I all but forgot my distress as another wave of desire rippled through my motionless body.

These emotions were so much stronger than I was used to that it was hard to stick to one train of thought despite the extra room in my head. Each new sensation overwhelmed me. I remembered Edward saying once—his voice in my head a weak shadow compared to the crystal, musical clarity I was hearing now—that his kind, our kind, were easily distracted. I could see why.

I made a concerted effort to focus. There was something I needed to say. The most important thing.

Very carefully, so carefully that the movement was actually discernible, I brought my right arm out from behind my back and raised my hand to touch his cheek. I refused to let myself be sidetracked by the pearly color of my hand or by the smooth silk of his skin or by the charge that zinged in my fingertips.

I stared into his eyes and heard my own voice for the first time.

“I love you,” I said, but it sounded like singing. My voice rang and shimmered like a bell.

His answering smile dazzled me more than it ever had when I was human; I could really see it now.

“As I love you,” he told me.

He took my face between his hands and leaned his face to mine—slow enough to remind me to be careful. He kissed me, soft as a whisper at first, and

then suddenly stronger, fiercer. I tried to remember to be gentle with him, but it was hard work to remember anything in the onslaught of sensation, hard to hold on to any coherent thoughts.

It was like he'd never kissed me—like this was our first kiss. And, in truth, he'd never kissed me this way before.

It almost made me feel guilty. Surely I was in breach of the contract. I couldn't be allowed to have this, too.

Though I didn't need oxygen, my breathing sped, raced as fast as it had when I was burning. This was a different kind of fire.

Someone cleared his throat. Emmett. I recognized the deep sound at once, joking and annoyed at the same time.

I'd forgotten we weren't alone. And then I realized that the way I was curved around Edward now was not exactly polite for company.

Embarrassed, I half-stepped away in another instantaneous movement. Edward chuckled and stepped with me, keeping his arms tight around my waist. His face was glowing—like a white flame burned from behind his diamond skin. I took an unnecessary breath to settle myself.

How different this kissing was! I read his expression as I compared the indistinct human memories to this clear, intense feeling. He looked… a little smug.

"You've been holding out on me," I accused in my singing voice, my eyes narrowing a tiny bit.

He laughed, radiant with relief that it was all over—the fear, the pain, the uncertainties, the waiting, all of it behind us now. “It was sort of necessary at the time,” he reminded me. “Now it’s your turn to not break me.” He laughed again. I frowned as I considered that, and then Edward was not the only one laughing. Carlisle stepped around Emmett and walked toward me swiftly; his eyes were only slightly wary, but Jasper shadowed his footsteps. I’d never seen Carlisle’s face before either, not really. I had an odd urge to blink—like I was staring at the sun.

“How do you feel, Bella?” Carlisle asked.

I considered that for a sixty-fourth of a second.

“Overwhelmed. There’s so much. . . .” I trailed off, listening to the bell-tone of my voice again.

“Yes, it can be quite confusing.”

I nodded one fast, jerky bob. “But I feel like me. Sort of. I didn’t expect that.”

Edward’s arms squeezed lightly around my waist. “I told you so,” he whispered.

“You are quite controlled,” Carlisle mused. “More so than I expected, even with the time you had to prepare yourself mentally for this.”

I thought about the wild mood swings, the difficulty concentrating, and whispered, “I’m not sure about that.”

He nodded seriously, and then his jeweled eyes glittered with interest. “It seems like we did something

right with the morphine this time. Tell me, what do you remember of the transformation process?”

I hesitated, intensely aware of Edward’s breath brushing against my cheek, sending whispers of electricity through my skin.

“Everything was… very dim before. I remember the baby couldn’t breathe. . . .”

I looked at Edward, momentarily frightened by the memory.

“Renesmee is healthy and well,” he promised, a gleam I’d never seen before in his eyes. He said her name with an understated fervor. A reverence. The way devout people talked about their gods. “What do you remember after that?”

I focused on my poker face. I’d never been much of a liar. “It’s hard to remember. It was so dark before. And then… I opened my eyes and I could see everything.”

“Amazing,” Carlisle breathed, his eyes alight.

Chagrin washed through me, and I waited for the heat to burn in my cheeks and give me away. And then I remembered that I would never blush again. Maybe that would protect Edward from the truth.

I’d have to find a way to tip off Carlisle, though. Someday. If he ever needed to create another vampire. That possibility seemed very unlikely, which made me feel better about lying.

"I want you to think—to tell me everything you remember," Carlisle pressed excitedly, and I couldn't help the grimace that flashed across my face. I didn't want to have to keep lying, because I might slip up. And I didn't want to think about the burning. Unlike the human memories, that part was perfectly clear and I found I could remember it with far too much precision.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Bella," Carlisle apologized immediately. "Of course your thirst must be very uncomfortable. This conversation can wait."

Until he'd mentioned it, the thirst actually wasn't unmanageable. There was so much room in my head. A separate part of my brain was keeping tabs on the burn in my throat, almost like a reflex. The way my old brain had handled breathing and blinking. But Carlisle's assumption brought the burn to the forefront of my mind. Suddenly, the dry ache was all I could think about, and the more I thought about it, the more it hurt. My hand flew up to cup my throat, like I could smother the flames from the outside. The skin of my neck was strange beneath my fingers. So smooth it was somehow soft, though it was hard as stone, too.

Edward dropped his arms and took my other hand, tugging gently. "Let's hunt, Bella."

My eyes opened wider and the pain of the thirst receded, shock taking its place. Me? Hunt? With Edward? But… how? I didn't know what to do. He read the alarm in my expression and smiled encouragingly. "It's quite easy, love. Instinctual. Don't

worry, I'll show you." When I didn't move, he grinned his crooked smile and raised his eyebrows. "I was under the impression that you'd always wanted to see me hunt."

I laughed in a short burst of humor (part of me listened in wonder to the pealing bell sound) as his words reminded me of cloudy human conversations. And then I took a whole second to run quickly through those first days with Edward—the true beginning of my life—in my head so that I would never forget them. I did not expect that it would be so uncomfortable to remember. Like trying to squint through muddy water. I knew from Rosalie's experience that if I thought of my human memories enough, I would not lose them over time. I did not want to forget one minute I'd spent with Edward, even now, when eternity stretched in front of us. I would have to make sure those human memories were cemented into my infallible vampire mind.

"Shall we?" Edward asked. He reached up to take the hand that was still at my neck. His fingers smoothed down the column of my throat. "I don't want you to be hurting," he added in a low murmur. Something I would not have been able to hear before.

"I'm fine," I said out of lingering human habit. "Wait. First."

There was so much. I'd never gotten to my questions. There were more important things than the ache.

It was Carlisle who spoke now. "Yes?"

"I want to see her. Renesmee."

It was oddly difficult to say her name. My daughter; these words were even harder to think. It all seemed so distant. I tried to remember how I had felt three days ago, and automatically, my hands pulled free of Edward's and dropped to my stomach. Flat. Empty. I clutched at the pale silk that covered my skin, panicking again, while an insignificant part of my mind noted that Alice must have dressed me. I knew there was nothing left inside me, and I faintly remembered the bloody removal scene, but the physical proof was still hard to process. All I knew was loving my little nudger inside of me. Outside of me, she seemed like something I must have imagined. A fading dream—a dream that was half nightmare.

While I wrestled with my confusion, I saw Edward and Carlisle exchange a guarded glance.

"What?" I demanded.

"Bella," Edward said soothingly. "That's not really a good idea. She's half human, love. Her heart beats, and blood runs in her veins. Until your thirst is positively under control... You don't want to put her in danger, do you?"

I frowned. Of course I must not want that.

Was I out of control? Confused, yes. Easily unfocused, yes. But dangerous? To her? My daughter?

I couldn't be positive that the answer was no. So I would have to be patient. That sounded difficult. Because until I saw her again, she wouldn't be real. Just a fading dream... of a stranger...

"Where is she?" I listened hard, and then I could hear the beating heart on the floor below me. I could hear more than one person breathing—quietly, like they were listening, too. There was also a fluttering sound, a thrumming, that I couldn't place. . . . And the sound of the heartbeat was so moist and appealing, that my mouth started watering.

So I would definitely have to learn how to hunt before I saw her. My stranger baby.

"Is Rosalie with her?"

"Yes," Edward answered in a clipped tone, and I could see that something he'd thought of upset him. I'd thought he and Rose were over their differences. Had the animosity erupted again? Before I could ask, he pulled my hands away from my flat stomach, tugging gently again.

"Wait," I protested again, trying to focus. "What about Jacob? And Charlie? Tell me everything that I missed. How long was I… unconscious?"

Edward didn't seem to notice my hesitation over the last word. Instead, he was exchanging another wary glance with Carlisle.

"What's wrong?" I whispered.

"Nothing is wrong," Carlisle told me, emphasizing the last word in a strange way.

"Nothing has changed much, actually—you were only unaware for just over two days. It was very fast, as these things go. Edward did an excellent job. Quite innovative—the venom injection straight to your heart

was his idea." He paused to smile proudly at his son and then sighed. "Jacob is still here, and Charlie still believes that you are sick. He thinks you're in Atlanta right now, undergoing tests at the CDC. We gave him a bad number, and he's frustrated. He's been speaking to Esme."

"I should call him…," I murmured to myself, but, listening to my own voice, I understood the new difficulties. He wouldn't recognize this voice. It wouldn't reassure him. And then the earlier surprise intruded. "Hold on—Jacob is still here?"

Another glance between them.

"Bella," Edward said quickly. "There's much to discuss, but we should take care of you first. You have to be in pain. . . ."

When he pointed that out, I remembered the burn in my throat and swallowed convulsively. "But Jacob—"

"We have all the time in the world for explanations, love," he reminded me gently. Of course. I could wait a little longer for the answer; it would be easier to listen when the fierce pain of the fiery thirst was no longer scattering my concentration. "Okay."

"Wait, wait, wait," Alice trilled from the doorway. She danced across the room, dreamily graceful. As with Edward and Carlisle, I felt some shock as I really looked at her face for the first time. So lovely. "You promised I could be there the first time! What if you two run past something reflective?"

"Alice—," Edward protested.

"It will only take a second!" And with that, Alice darted from the room. Edward sighed.

"What is she talking about?"

But Alice was already back, carrying the huge, gilt-framed mirror from Rosalie's room, which was nearly twice as tall as she was, and several times as wide. Jasper had been so still and silent that I'd taken no notice of him since he'd followed behind Carlisle. Now he moved again, to hover over Alice, his eyes locked on my expression. Because I was the danger here.

I knew he would be tasting the mood around me, too, and so he must have felt my jolt of shock as I studied his face, looking at it closely for the first time. Through my sightless human eyes, the scars left from his former life with the newborn armies in the South had been mostly invisible. Only with a bright light to throw their slightly raised shapes into definition could I even make out their existence. Now that I could see, the scars were Jasper's most dominant feature. It was hard to take my eyes off his ravaged neck and jaw—hard to believe that even a vampire could have survived so many sets of teeth ripping into his throat.

Instinctively, I tensed to defend myself. Any vampire who saw Jasper would have had the same reaction. The scars were like a lighted billboard. Dangerous, they screamed. How many vampires had tried to kill Jasper? Hundreds? Thousands? The same number that had died in the attempt.

Jasper both saw and felt my assessment, my caution, and he smiled wryly.

"Edward gave me grief for not getting you to a mirror before the wedding," Alice said, pulling my attention away from her frightening lover. "I'm not going to be chewed out again."

"Chewed out?" Edward asked skeptically, one eyebrow curving upward.

"Maybe I'm overstating things," she murmured absently as she turned the mirror to face me.

"And maybe this has solely to do with your own voyeuristic gratification," he countered.

Alice winked at him.

I was only aware of this exchange with the lesser part of my concentration. The greater part was riveted on the person in the mirror.

My first reaction was an unthinking pleasure. The alien creature in the glass was indisputably beautiful, every bit as beautiful as Alice or Esme. She was fluid even in stillness, and her flawless face was pale as the moon against the frame of her dark, heavy hair. Her limbs were smooth and strong, skin glistening subtly, luminous as a pearl.

My second reaction was horror.

Who was she? At first glance, I couldn't find my face anywhere in the smooth, perfect planes of her features.

And her eyes! Though I'd known to expect them, her eyes still sent a thrill of terror through me.

All the while I studied and reacted, her face was perfectly composed, a carving of a goddess, showing nothing of the turmoil roiling inside me. And then her full lips moved.

“The eyes?” I whispered, unwilling to say my eyes. “How long?

“They’ll darken up in a few months,” Edward said in a soft, comforting voice. “Animal blood dilutes the color more quickly than a diet of human blood. They’ll turn amber first, then gold.”

My eyes would blaze like vicious red flames for months?

“Months?” My voice was higher now, stressed. In the mirror, the perfect eyebrows lifted incredulously above her glowing crimson eyes—brighter than any I’d ever seen before. Jasper took a step forward, alarmed by the intensity of my sudden anxiety. He knew young vampires only too well; did this emotion presage some misstep on my part?

No one answered my question. I looked away, to Edward and Alice. Both their eyes were slightly unfocused—reacting to Jasper’s unease. Listening to its cause, looking ahead to the immediate future.

I took another deep, unnecessary breath.

“No, I’m fine,” I promised them. My eyes flickered to the stranger in the mirror and back. “It’s just… a lot to take in.”

Jasper’s brow furrowed, highlighting the two scars over his left eye.

"I don't know," Edward murmured.

The woman in the mirror frowned. "What question did I miss?"

Edward grinned. "Jasper wonders how you're doing it."

"Doing what?"

"Controlling your emotions, Bella," Jasper answered. "I've never seen a newborn do that—stop an emotion in its tracks that way. You were upset, but when you saw our concern, you reined it in, regained power over yourself. I was prepared to help, but you didn't need it."

"Is that wrong?" I asked. My body automatically froze as I waited for his verdict.

"No," he said, but his voice was unsure.

Edward stroked his hand down my arm, as if encouraging me to thaw. "It's very impressive, Bella, but we don't understand it. We don't know how long it can hold."

I considered that for a portion of a second. At any moment, would I snap? Turn into a monster?

I couldn't feel it coming on.... Maybe there was no way to anticipate such a thing.

"But what do you think?" Alice asked, a little impatient now, pointing to the mirror.

"I'm not sure," I hedged, not wanting to admit how frightened I really was. I stared at the beautiful

woman with the terrifying eyes, looking for pieces of me. There was something there in the shape of her lips—if you looked past the dizzying beauty, it was true that her upper lip was slightly out of balance, a bit too full to match the lower. Finding this familiar little flaw made me feel a tiny bit better. Maybe the rest of me was in there, too.

I raised my hand experimentally, and the woman in the mirror copied the movement, touching her face, too. Her crimson eyes watched me warily.

Edward sighed.

I turned away from her to look at him, raising one eyebrow.

“Disappointed?” I asked, my ringing voice impassive.

He laughed. “Yes,” he admitted.

I felt the shock break through the composed mask on my face, followed instantly by the hurt.

Alice snarled. Jasper leaned forward again, waiting for me to snap. But Edward ignored them and wrapped his arms tightly around my newly frozen form, pressing his lips against my cheek. “I was rather hoping that I’d be able to hear your mind, now that it is more similar to my own,” he murmured. “And here I am, as frustrated as ever, wondering what could possibly be going on inside your head.”

I felt better at once.

“Oh well,” I said lightly, relieved that my thoughts were still my own. “I guess my brain will never work right. At least I’m pretty.”

It was becoming easier to joke with him as I adjusted, to think in straight lines. To be myself.

Edward growled in my ear. “Bella, you have never been merely pretty.”

Then his face pulled away from mine, and he sighed. “All right, all right,” he said to someone.

“What?” I asked.

“You’re making Jasper more edgy by the second. He may relax a little when you’ve hunted.”

I looked at Jasper’s worried expression and nodded. I didn’t want to snap here, if that was coming. Better to be surrounded by trees than family.

“Okay. Let’s hunt,” I agreed, a thrill of nerves and anticipation making my stomach quiver. I unwrapped Edward’s arms from around me, keeping one of his hands, and turned my back on the strange and beautiful woman in the mirror.

# Chapter 21

## FIRST HUNT

“The window?” I asked, staring two stories down.

I’d never really been afraid of heights per se, but being able to see all the details with such clarity made the prospect less appealing. The angles of the rocks below were sharper than I would have imagined them.

Edward smiled. “It’s the most convenient exit. If you’re frightened, I can carry you.”

“We have all eternity, and you’re worried about the time it would take to walk to the back door?”

He frowned slightly. “Renesmee and Jacob are downstairs. . . .”

“Oh.”

Right. I was the monster now. I had to keep away from scents that might trigger my wild side. From the people that I loved in particular. Even the ones I didn’t really know yet.

“Is Renesmee… okay… with Jacob there?” I whispered. I realized belatedly that it must have been Jacob’s heart I’d heard below. I listened hard again, but I could only hear the one steady pulse. “He doesn’t like her much.”

Edward’s lips tightened in an odd way. “Trust me, she is perfectly safe. I know exactly what Jacob is thinking.”

"Of course," I murmured, and looked at the ground again.

"Stalling?" he challenged.

"A little. I don't know how. . . ."

And I was very conscious of my family behind me, watching silently. Mostly silently. Emmett had already chuckled under his breath once. One mistake, and he'd be rolling on the floor. Then the jokes about the world's only clumsy vampire would start....

Also, this dress—that Alice must have put me in sometime when I was too lost in the burning to notice—was not what I would have picked out for either jumping or hunting. Tightly fitted ice-blue silk? What did she think I would need it for? Was there a cocktail party later?

"Watch me," Edward said. And then, very casually, he stepped out of the tall, open window and fell.

I watched carefully, analyzing the angle at which he bent his knees to absorb the impact. The sound of his landing was very low—a muted thud that could have been a door softly closed, or a book gently laid on a table.

It didn't look hard.

Clenching my teeth as I concentrated, I tried to copy his casual step into empty air. Ha! The ground seemed to move toward me so slowly that it was nothing at all to place my feet—what shoes had Alice put me in? Stilettos? She'd lost her mind—to place my silly shoes exactly right so that landing was no

different than stepping one foot forward on a flat surface.

I absorbed the impact in the balls of my feet, not wanting to snap off the thin heels. My landing seemed just as quiet as his. I grinned at him.

“Right. Easy.”

He smiled back. “Bella?”

“Yes?”

“That was quite graceful—even for a vampire.”

I considered that for a moment, and then I beamed. If he’d just been saying that, then Emmett would have laughed. No one found his remark humorous, so it must have been true. It was the first time anyone had ever applied the word graceful to me in my entire life… or, well, existence anyway.

“Thank you,” I told him.

And then I hooked the silver satin shoes off my feet one by one and lobbed them together back through the open window. A little too hard, maybe, but I heard someone catch them before they could damage the paneling.

Alice grumbled, “Her fashion sense hasn’t improved as much as her balance.”

Edward took my hand—I couldn’t stop marveling at the smoothness, the comfortable temperature of his skin—and darted through the backyard to the edge of the river. I went along with him effortlessly.

Everything physical seemed very simple.

“Are we swimming?” I asked him when we stopped beside the water.

“And ruin your pretty dress? No. We’re jumping.”

I pursed my lips, considering. The river was about fifty yards wide here.

“You first,” I said.

He touched my cheek, took two quick backward strides, and then ran back those two steps, launching himself from a flat stone firmly embedded in the riverbank. I studied the flash of movement as he arced over the water, finally turning a somersault just before he disappeared into the thick trees on the other side of the river.

“Show-off,” I muttered, and heard his invisible laugh.

I backed up five paces, just in case, and took a deep breath.

Suddenly, I was anxious again. Not about falling or getting hurt—I was more worried about the forest getting hurt.

It had come on slowly, but I could feel it now—the raw, massive strength thrilling in my limbs. I was suddenly sure that if I wanted to tunnel under the river, to claw or beat my way straight through the bedrock, it wouldn’t take me very long. The objects around me

—the trees, the shrubs, the rocks… the house—had all begun to look very fragile. Hoping very much that Esme was not particularly fond of any specific trees across the river, I began my first stride. And then stopped when the tight satin split six inches up my thigh. Alice!

Well, Alice always seemed to treat clothes as if they were disposable and meant for onetime usage, so she shouldn't mind this. I bent to carefully grasp the hem at the undamaged right seam between my fingers and, exerting the tiniest amount of pressure possible, I ripped the dress open to the top of my thigh. Then I fixed the other side to match.

Much better.

I could hear the muffled laughter in the house, and even the sound of someone gritting her teeth. The laughter came from upstairs and down, and I very easily recognized the much different, rough, throaty chuckle from the first floor.

So Jacob was watching, too? I couldn't imagine what he was thinking now, or what he was still doing here. I'd envisioned our reunion—if he could ever forgive me—taking place far in the future, when I was more stable, and time had healed the wounds I'd inflicted in his heart.

I didn't turn to look at him now, wary of my mood swings. It wouldn't be good to let any emotion take too strong a hold on my frame of mind. Jasper's fears had me on edge, too. I had to hunt before I dealt with anything else. I tried to forget everything else so I could concentrate.

“Bella?” Edward called from the woods, his voice moving closer. “Do you want to watch again?”

But I remembered everything perfectly, of course, and I didn’t want to give Emmett a reason to find more humor in my education. This was physical—it should be instinctive. So I took a deep breath and ran for the river.

Unhindered by my skirt, it took only one long bound to reach the water’s edge. Just an eighty-fourth of a second, and yet it was plenty of time—my eyes and my mind moved so quickly that one step was enough. It was simple to position my right foot just so against the flat stone and exert the adequate pressure to send my body wheeling up into the air. I was paying more attention to aim than force, and I erred on the amount of power necessary—but at least I didn’t err on the side that would have gotten me wet. The fifty yard width was slightly too easy a distance. . . . It was a strange, giddy, electrifying thing, but a short thing. An entire second had yet to pass, and I was across.

I was expecting the close-packed trees to be a problem, but they were surprisingly helpful. It was a simple matter to reach out with one sure hand as I fell back toward the earth again deep inside the forest and catch myself on a convenient branch; I swung lightly from the limb and landed on my toes, still fifteen feet from the ground on the wide bough of a Sitka spruce.

It was fabulous.

Over the sound of my peals of delighted laughter, I could hear Edward racing to find me. My jump had

been twice as long as his. When he reached my tree, his eyes were wide. I leaped nimbly from the branch to his side, soundlessly landing again on the balls of my feet.

“Was that good?” I wondered, my breathing accelerated with excitement.

“Very good.” He smiled approvingly, but his casual tone didn’t match the surprised expression in his eyes.

“Can we do it again?”

“Focus, Bella—we’re on a hunting trip.”

“Oh, right.” I nodded. “Hunting.”

“Follow me… if you can.” He grinned, his expression suddenly taunting, and broke into a run.

He was faster than me. I couldn’t imagine how he moved his legs with such blinding speed, but it was beyond me. However, I was stronger, and every stride of mine matched the length of three of his. And so I flew with him through the living green web, by his side, not following at all. As I ran, I couldn’t help laughing quietly at the thrill of it; the laughter neither slowed me nor upset my focus.

I could finally understand why Edward never hit the trees when he ran—a question that had always been a mystery to me. It was a peculiar sensation, the balance between the speed and the clarity. For, while I rocketed over, under, and through the thick jade maze at a rate that should have reduced everything around me to a streaky green blur, I could plainly see

each tiny leaf on all the small branches of every insignificant shrub that I passed.

The wind of my speed blew my hair and my torn dress out behind me, and, though I knew it shouldn't, it felt warm against my skin. Just as the rough forest floor shouldn't feel like velvet beneath my bare soles, and the limbs that whipped against my skin shouldn't feel like caressing feathers.

The forest was much more alive than I'd ever known—small creatures whose existence I'd never guessed at teemed in the leaves around me. They all grew silent after we passed, their breath quickening in fear. The animals had a much wiser reaction to our scent than humans seemed to. Certainly, it'd had the opposite effect on me. I kept waiting to feel winded, but my breath came effortlessly. I waited for the burn to begin in my muscles, but my strength only seemed to increase as I grew accustomed to my stride. My leaping bounds stretched longer, and soon he was trying to keep up with me. I laughed again, exultant, when I heard him falling behind. My naked feet touched the ground so infrequently now it felt more like flying than running.

"Bella," he called dryly, his voice even, lazy. I could hear nothing else; he had stopped. I briefly considered mutiny.

But, with a sigh, I whirled and skipped lightly to his side, some hundred yards back. I looked at him expectantly. He was smiling, with one eyebrow raised. He was so beautiful that I could only stare.

"Did you want to stay in the country?" he asked, amused. "Or were you planning to continue on to Canada this afternoon?"

"This is fine," I agreed, concentrating less on what he was saying and more on the mesmerizing way his lips moved when he spoke. It was hard not to become sidetracked with everything fresh in my strong new eyes. "What are we hunting?"

"Elk. I thought something easy for your first time . . ." He trailed off when my eyes narrowed at the word easy.

But I wasn't going to argue; I was too thirsty. As soon as I'd started to think about the dry burn in my throat, it was all I could think about. Definitely getting worse. My mouth felt like four o'clock on a June afternoon in Death Valley.

"Where?" I asked, scanning the trees impatiently. Now that I had given the thirst my attention, it seemed to taint every other thought in my head, leaking into the more pleasant thoughts of running and Edward's lips and kissing and… scorching thirst. I couldn't get away from it.

"Hold still for a minute," he said, putting his hands lightly on my shoulders. The urgency of my thirst receded momentarily at his touch.

"Now close your eyes," he murmured. When I obeyed, he raised his hands to my face, stroking my cheekbones. I felt my breathing speed and waited briefly again for the blush that wouldn't come.

“Listen,” Edward instructed. “What do you hear?”

Everything, I could have said; his perfect voice, his breath, his lips brushing together as he spoke, the whisper of birds preening their feathers in the treetops, their fluttering heartbeats, the maple leaves scraping together, the faint clicking of ants following each other in a long line up the bark of the nearest tree. But I knew he meant something specific, so I let my ears range outward, seeking something different than the small hum of life that surrounded me. There was an open space near us—the wind had a different sound across the exposed grass—and a small creek, with a rocky bed. And there, near the noise of the water, was the splash of lapping tongues, the loud thudding of heavy hearts, pumping thick streams of blood. . . .

It felt like the sides of my throat had sucked closed.

“By the creek, to the northeast?” I asked, my eyes still shut.

“Yes.” His tone was approving. “Now… wait for the breeze again and… what do you smell?”

Mostly him—his strange honey-lilac-and-sun perfume. But also the rich, earthy smell of rot and moss, the resin in the evergreens, the warm, almost nutty aroma of the small rodents cowering beneath the tree roots. And then, reaching out again, the clean smell of the water, which was surprisingly unappealing despite my thirst. I focused toward the water and found the scent that must have gone with the lapping noise and the pounding heart. Another warm smell, rich and tangy, stronger than the others.

And yet nearly as unappealing as the brook. I wrinkled my nose.

He chuckled. “I know—it takes some getting used to.”

“Three?” I guessed.

“Five. There are two more in the trees behind them.”

“What do I do now?”

His voice sounded like he was smiling. “What do you feel like doing?”

I thought about that, my eyes still shut as I listened and breathed in the scent. Another bout of baking thirst intruded on my awareness, and suddenly the warm, tangy odor wasn’t quite so objectionable. At least it would be something hot and wet in my desiccated mouth. My eyes snapped open.

“Don’t think about it,” he suggested as he lifted his hands off my face and took a step back. “Just follow your instincts.”

I let myself drift with the scent, barely aware of my movement as I ghosted down the incline to the narrow meadow where the stream flowed. My body shifted forward automatically into a low crouch as I hesitated at the fern-fringed edge of the trees. I could see a big buck, two dozen antler points crowning his head, at the stream’s edge, and the shadow-spotted shapes of the four others heading eastward into forest at a leisurely pace.

I centered myself around the scent of the male, the hot spot in his shaggy neck where the warmth pulsed

strongest. Only thirty yards—two or three bounds—between us. I tensed myself for the first leap.

But as my muscles bunched in preparation, the wind shifted, blowing stronger now, and from the south. I didn't stop to think, hurtling out of the trees in a path perpendicular to my original plan, scaring the elk into the forest, racing after a new fragrance so attractive that there wasn't a choice. It was compulsory.

The scent ruled completely. I was single-minded as I traced it, aware only of the thirst and the smell that promised to quench it. The thirst got worse, so painful now that it confused all my other thoughts and began to remind me of the burn of venom in my veins.

There was only one thing that had any chance of penetrating my focus now, an instinct more powerful, more basic than the need to quench the fire—it was the instinct to protect myself from danger. Self-preservation.

I was suddenly alert to the fact that I was being followed. The pull of the irresistible scent warred with the impulse to turn and defend my hunt. A bubble of sound built in my chest, my lips pulled back of their own accord to expose my teeth in warning. My feet slowed, the need to protect my back struggling against the desire to quench my thirst.

And then I could hear my pursuer gaining, and defense won. As I spun, the rising sound ripped its way up my throat and out.

The feral snarl, coming from my own mouth, was so unexpected that it brought me up short. It unsettled me, and it cleared my head for a second—the thirst-driven haze receded, though the thirst burned on.

The wind shifted, blowing the smell of wet earth and coming rain across my face, further freeing me from the other scent's fiery grip—a scent so delicious it could only be human.

Edward hesitated a few feet away, his arms raised as if to embrace me—or restrain me. His face was intent and cautious as I froze, horrified.

I realized that I had been about to attack him. With a hard jerk, I straightened out of my defensive crouch. I held my breath as I refocused, fearing the power of the fragrance swirling up from the south.

He could see reason return to my face, and he took a step toward me, lowering his arms.

"I have to get away from here," I spit through my teeth, using the breath I had. Shock crossed his face. "Can you leave?"

I didn't have time to ask him what he meant by that. I knew the ability to think clearly would last only as long as I could stop myself from thinking of—

I burst into a run again, a flat-out sprint straight north, concentrating solely on the uncomfortable feeling of sensory deprivation that seemed to be my body's only response to the lack of air. My one goal was to run far enough away that the scent behind me

would be completely lost. Impossible to find, even if I changed my mind…

Once again, I was aware of being followed, but I was sane this time. I fought the instinct to breathe—to use the flavors in the air to be sure it was Edward. I didn't have to fight long; though I was running faster than I ever had before, shooting like a comet through the straightest path I could find in the trees; Edward caught up with me after a short minute.

A new thought occurred to me, and I stopped dead, my feet planted. I was sure it must be safe here, but I held my breath just in case.

Edward blew past me, surprised by my sudden freeze. He wheeled around and was at my side in a second. He put his hands on my shoulders and stared into my eyes, shock still the dominant emotion on his face.

"How did you do that?" he demanded.

"You let me beat you before, didn't you?" I demanded back, ignoring his question. And I'd thought I'd been doing so well!

When I opened my mouth, I could taste the air—it was unpolluted now, with no trace of the compelling perfume to torment my thirst. I took a cautious breath. He shrugged and shook his head, refusing to be deflected. "Bella, how did you do it?"

"Run away? I held my breath."

"But how did you stop hunting?"

"When you came up behind me… I'm so sorry about that."

"Why are you apologizing to me? I'm the one who was horribly careless. I assumed no one would be so far from the trails, but I should have checked first. Such a stupid mistake! You have nothing to apologize for."

"But I growled at you!" I was still horrified that I was physically capable of such blasphemy.

"Of course you did. That's only natural. But I can't understand how you ran away."

"What else could I do?" I asked. His attitude confused me—what did he want to have happened? "It might have been someone I know!"

He startled me, suddenly bursting into a spasm of loud laughter, throwing his head back and letting the sound echo off the trees.

"Why are you laughing at me?"

He stopped at once, and I could see he was wary again.

Keep it under control, I thought to myself. I had to watch my temper. Just like I was a young werewolf rather than a vampire.

"I'm not laughing at you, Bella. I'm laughing because I am in shock. And I am in shock because I am completely amazed."

"Why?"

"You shouldn't be able to do any of this. You shouldn't be so... so rational. You shouldn't be able to stand here discussing this with me calmly and coolly. And, much more than any of that, you should not have been able to break off mid-hunt with the scent of human blood in the air. Even mature vampires have difficulty with that—we're always very careful of where we hunt so as not to put ourselves in the path of temptation. Bella, you're behaving like you're decades rather than days old."

"Oh." But I'd known it was going to be hard. That was why I'd been so on guard. I'd been expecting it to be difficult.

He put his hands on my face again, and his eyes were full of wonder. "What wouldn't I give to be able to see into your mind for just this one moment."

Such powerful emotions. I'd been prepared for the thirst part, but not this. I'd been so sure it wouldn't be the same when he touched me. Well, truthfully, it wasn't the same. It was stronger.

I reached up to trace the planes of his face; my fingers lingered on his lips.

"I thought I wouldn't feel this way for a long time?" My uncertainty made the words a question. "But I still want you."

He blinked in shock. "How can you even concentrate on that? Aren't you unbearably thirsty?"

Of course I was now, now that he'd brought it up again!

I tried to swallow and then sighed, closing my eyes like I had before to help me concentrate. I let my senses range out around me, tensed this time in case of another onslaught of the delicious taboo scent.

Edward dropped his hands, not even breathing while I listened farther and farther out into the web of green life, sifting through the scents and sounds for something not totally repellant to my thirst. There was a hint of something different, a faint trail to the east. . . .

My eyes flashed open, but my focus was still on sharper senses as I turned and darted silently eastward. The ground sloped steeply upward almost at once, and I ran in a hunting crouch, close to the ground, taking to the trees when that was easier. I sensed rather than heard Edward with me, flowing quietly through the woods, letting me lead. The vegetation thinned as we climbed higher; the scent of pitch and resin grew more powerful, as did the trail I followed—it was a warm scent, sharper than the smell of the elk and more appealing. A few seconds more and I could hear the muted padding of immense feet, so much subtler than the crunch of hooves. The sound was up—in the branches rather than on the ground. Automatically I darted into the boughs as well, gaining the strategic higher position, halfway up a towering silver fir. The soft thud of paws continued stealthily beneath me now; the rich scent was very close. My eyes pinpointed the movement linked with the sound, and I saw the tawny hide of the great cat slinking along the wide branch of a spruce just down and to the left of my perch. He was big—easily four

times my mass. His eyes were intent on the ground beneath; the cat hunted, too. I caught the smell of something smaller, bland next to the aroma of my prey, cowering in brush below the tree. The lion's tail twitched spasmodically as he prepared to spring.

With a light bound, I sailed through the air and landed on the lion's branch. He felt the shiver of the wood and whirled, shrieking surprise and defiance. He clawed the space between us, his eyes bright with fury. Half-crazed with thirst, I ignored the exposed fangs and the hooked claws and launched myself at him, knocking us both to the forest floor.

It wasn't much of a fight.

His raking claws could have been caressing fingers for all the impact they had on my skin. His teeth could find no purchase against my shoulder or my throat. His weight was nothing. My teeth unerringly sought his throat, and his instinctive resistance was pitifully feeble against my strength. My jaws locked easily over the precise point where the heat flow concentrated.

It was effortless as biting into butter. My teeth were steel razors; they cut through the fur and fat and sinews like they weren't there.

The flavor was wrong, but the blood was hot and wet and it soothed the ragged, itching thirst as I drank in an eager rush. The cat's struggles grew more and more feeble, and his screams choked off with a gurgle. The warmth of the blood radiated throughout my whole body, heating even my fingertips and toes.

The lion was finished before I was. The thirst flared again when he ran dry, and I shoved his carcass off my body in disgust. How could I still be thirsty after all that?

I wrenched myself erect in one quick move. Standing, I realized I was a bit of a mess. I wiped my face off on the back of my arm and tried to fix the dress. The claws that had been so ineffectual against my skin had had more success with the thin satin.

“Hmm,” Edward said. I looked up to see him leaning casually against a tree trunk, watching me with a thoughtful look on his face.

“I guess I could have done that better.” I was covered in dirt, my hair knotted, my dress bloodstained and hanging in tatters. Edward didn’t come home from hunting trips looking like this.

“You did perfectly fine,” he assured me. “It’s just that… it was much more difficult for me to watch than it should have been.”

I raised my eyebrows, confused.

“It goes against the grain,” he explained, “letting you wrestle with lions. I was having an anxiety attack the whole time.”

“Silly.”

“I know. Old habits die hard. I like the improvements to your dress, though.”

If I could have blushed, I would have. I changed the subject. “Why am I still thirsty?”

"Because you're young."

I sighed. "And I don't suppose there are any other mountain lions nearby."

"Plenty of deer, though."

I made a face. "They don't smell as good."

"Herbivores. The meat-eaters smell more like humans," he explained.

"Not that much like humans," I disagreed, trying not to remember.

"We could go back," he said solemnly, but there was a teasing light in his eye.

"Whoever it was out there, if they were men, they probably wouldn't even mind death if you were the one delivering it." His gaze ran over my ravaged dress again. "In fact, they would think they were already dead and gone to heaven the moment they saw you."

I rolled my eyes and snorted. "Let's go hunt some stinking herbivores."

We found a large herd of mule deer as we ran back toward home. He hunted with me this time, now that I'd gotten the hang of it. I brought down a large buck, making nearly as much of a mess as I had with the lion. He'd finished with two before I was done with the first, not a hair ruffled, not a spot on his white shirt. We chased the scattered and terrified herd, but instead of feeding again, this time I watched carefully to see how he was able to hunt so neatly.

All the times that I had wished that Edward would not have to leave me behind when he hunted, I had secretly been just a little relieved. Because I was sure that seeing this would be frightening. Horrifying. That seeing him hunt would finally make him look like a vampire to me.

Of course, it was much different from this perspective, as a vampire myself. But I doubted that even my human eyes would have missed the beauty here. It was a surprisingly sensual experience to observe Edward hunting. His smooth spring was like the sinuous strike of a snake; his hands were so sure, so strong, so completely inescapable; his full lips were perfect as they parted gracefully over his gleaming teeth. He was glorious. I felt a sudden jolt of both pride and desire. He was mine. Nothing could ever separate him from me now. I was too strong to be torn from his side. He was very quick. He turned to me and gazed curiously at my gloating expression.

“No longer thirsty?” he asked.

I shrugged. “You distracted me. You’re much better at it than I am.”

“Centuries of practice.” He smiled. His eyes were a disconcertingly lovely shade of honey gold now.

“Just one,” I corrected him.

He laughed. “Are you done for today? Or did you want to continue?”

“Done, I think.” I felt very full, sort of sloshy, even. I wasn’t sure how much more liquid would fit into my

body. But the burn in my throat was only muted. Then again, I'd known that thirst was just an inescapable part of this life. And worth it.

I felt in control. Perhaps my sense of security was false, but I did feel pretty good about not killing anyone today. If I could resist totally human strangers, wouldn't I be able to handle the werewolf and a half-vampire child that I loved?

"I want to see Renesmee," I said. Now that my thirst was tamed (if nothing close to erased), my earlier worries were hard to forget. I wanted to reconcile the stranger who was my daughter with the creature I'd loved three days ago. It was so odd, so wrong not to have her inside me still. Abruptly, I felt empty and uneasy. He held out his hand to me. I took it, and his skin felt warmer than before. His cheek was faintly flushed, the shadows under his eyes all but vanished. I was unable to resist stroking his face again. And again.

I sort of forgot that I was waiting for a response to my request as I stared into his shimmering gold eyes.

It was almost as hard as it had been to turn away from the scent of human blood, but I somehow kept the need to be careful firmly in my head as I stretched up on my toes and wrapped my arms around him. Gently.

He was not so hesitant in his movements; his arms locked around my waist and pulled me tight against his body. His lips crushed down on mine, but they felt soft. My lips no longer shaped themselves around his; they held their own.

Like before, it was as if the touch of his skin, his lips, his hands, was sinking right through my smooth, hard skin and into my new bones. To the very core of my body. I hadn't imagined that I could love him more than I had.

My old mind hadn't been capable of holding this much love. My old heart had not been strong enough to bear it.

Maybe this was the part of me that I'd brought forward to be intensified in my new life. Like Carlisle's compassion and Esme's devotion. I would probably never be able to do anything interesting or special like Edward, Alice, and Jasper could do. Maybe I would just love Edward more than anyone in the history of the world had ever loved anyone else.

I could live with that.

I remembered parts of this—twisting my fingers in his hair, tracing the planes of his chest—but other parts were so new. He was new. It was an entirely different experience with Edward kissing me so fearlessly, so forcefully. I responded to his intensity, and then suddenly we were falling.

"Oops," I said, and he laughed underneath me. "I didn't mean to tackle you like that. Are you okay?"

He stroked my face. "Slightly better than okay." And then a perplexed expression crossed his face. "Renesmee?" he asked uncertainly, trying to ascertain what I wanted most in this moment. A very difficult question to answer, because I wanted so many things at the same time.

I could tell that he wasn't exactly averse to procrastinating our return trip, and it was hard to think about much besides his skin on mine—there really wasn't that much left of the dress. But my memory of Renesmee, before and after her birth, was becoming more and more dreamlike to me. More unlikely. All my memories of her were human memories; an aura of artificiality clung to them. Nothing seemed real that I hadn't seen with these eyes, touched with these hands.

Every minute, the reality of that little stranger slipped further away.

"Renesmee," I agreed, rueful, and I whipped back up onto my feet, pulling him with me.

# Chapter 22

## PROMISED

Thinking of Renesmee brought her to that center-stage place in my strange, new, and roomy but distractible mind. So many questions.

"Tell me about her," I insisted as he took my hand. Being linked barely slowed us.

"She's like nothing else in the world," he told me, and the sound of an almost religious devotion was there again in his voice.

I felt a sharp pang of jealousy over this stranger. He knew her and I did not. It wasn't fair.

"How much is she like you? How much like me? Or like I was, anyway."

"It seems a fairly even divide."

"She was warm-blooded," I remembered.

"Yes. She has a heartbeat, though it runs a little bit faster than a human's. Her temperature is a little bit hotter than usual, too. She sleeps."

"Really?"

"Quite well for a newborn. The only parents in the world who don't need sleep, and our child already sleeps through the night." He chuckled.

I liked the way he said our child. The words made her more real.

"She has exactly your color eyes—so that didn't get lost, after all." He smiled at me.

"They're so beautiful."

"And the vampire parts?" I asked.

"Her skin seems about as impenetrable as ours. Not that anyone would dream of testing that."

I blinked at him, a little shocked.

"Of course no one would," he assured me again. "Her diet… well, she prefers to drink blood. Carlisle continues to try to persuade her to drink some baby formula, too, but she doesn't have much patience with it. Can't say that I blame her—nasty-smelling stuff, even for human food."

I gaped openly at him now. He made it sound like they were having conversations.

"Persuade her?"

"She's intelligent, shockingly so, and progressing at an immense pace. Though she doesn't speak—yet—she communicates quite effectively."

"Doesn't. Speak. Yet. "

He slowed our pace further, letting me absorb this.

"What do you mean, she communicates effectively?" I demanded.

"I think it will be easier for you to… see for yourself. It's rather difficult to describe."

I considered that. I knew there was a lot that I needed to see for myself before it would be real. I wasn't sure how much more I was ready for, so I changed the subject.

"Why is Jacob still here?" I asked. "How can he stand it? Why should he?" My ringing voice trembled a little. "Why should he have to suffer more?"

"Jacob isn't suffering," he said in a strange new tone. "Though I might be willing to change his condition," Edward added through his teeth.

"Edward!" I hissed, yanking him to a stop (and feeling a little thrill of smugness that I was able to do it). "How can you say that? Jacob has given up everything to protect us!

What I've put him through—!" I cringed at the dim memory of shame and guilt. It seemed odd now that I had needed him so much then. That sense of absence without him near had vanished; it must have been a human weakness.

"You'll see exactly how I can say that," Edward muttered. "I promised him that I would let him explain, but I doubt you'll see it much differently than I do. Of course, I'm often wrong about your thoughts, aren't I?" He pursed his lips and eyed me.

"Explain what?"

Edward shook his head. "I promised. Though I don't know if I really owe him anything at all anymore. . . ." His teeth ground together.

"Edward, I don't understand." Frustration and indignation took over my head. He stroked my cheek and then smiled gently when my face smoothed out in response, desire momentarily overruling annoyance. "It's harder than you make it look, I know. I remember."

"I don't like feeling confused."

"I know. And so let's get you home, so that you can see it all for yourself." His eyes ran over the remains of my dress as he spoke of going home, and he frowned. "Hmm."

After a half second of thought, he unbuttoned his white shirt and held it out for me to put my arms through.

"That bad?"

He grinned.

I slipped my arms into his sleeves and then buttoned it swiftly over my ragged bodice. Of course, that left him without a shirt, and it was impossible not to find that distracting.

"I'll race you," I said, and then cautioned, "no throwing the game this time!"

He dropped my hand and grinned. "On your mark . . ."

Finding my way to my new home was simpler than walking down Charlie's street to my old one. Our scent left a clear and easy trail to follow, even running as fast as I could. Edward had me beat till we hit the

river. I took a chance and made my leap early, trying to use my extra strength to win.

“Ha!” I exulted when I heard my feet touch the grass first.

Listening for his landing, I heard something I did not expect. Something loud and much too close. A thudding heart.

Edward was beside me in the same second, his hands clamped down hard on the tops of my arms.

“Don’t breathe,” he cautioned me urgently.

I tried not to panic as I froze mid-breath. My eyes were the only things that moved, wheeling instinctively to find the source of the sound.

Jacob stood at the line where the forest touched the Cullens’ lawn, his arms folded across his body, his jaw clenched tight. Invisible in the woods behind him, I heard now two larger hearts, and the faint crush of bracken under huge, pacing paws.

“Carefully, Jacob,” Edward said. A snarl from the forest echoed the concern in his voice.

“Maybe this isn’t the best way—”

“You think it would be better to let her near the baby first?” Jacob interrupted. “It’s safer to see how Bella does with me. I heal fast.”

This was a test? To see if I could not kill Jacob before I tried to not kill Renesmee? I felt sick in the strangest

way—it had nothing to do with my stomach, only my mind. Was this Edward's idea?

I glanced at his face anxiously; Edward seemed to deliberate for a moment, and then his expression twisted from concern into something else. He shrugged, and there was an undercurrent of hostility in his voice when he said, "It's your neck, I guess."

The growl from the forest was furious this time; Leah, I had no doubt. What was with Edward? After all that we'd been through, shouldn't he have been able to feel some kindness for my best friend? I'd thought—maybe foolishly—that Edward was sort of Jacob's friend now, too. I must have misread them.

But what was Jacob doing? Why would he offer himself as a test to protect Renesmee?

It didn't make any sense to me. Even if our friendship had survived…

And as my eyes met Jacob's now, I thought that maybe it had. He still looked like my best friend. But he wasn't the one who had changed. What did I look like to him?

Then he smiled his familiar smile, the smile of a kindred spirit, and I was sure our friendship was intact. It was just like before, when we were hanging out in his homemade garage, just two friends killing time. Easy and normal. Again, I noticed that the strange need I'd felt for him before I'd changed was completely gone. He was just my friend, the way it was supposed to be.

It still made no sense what he was doing now, though. Was he really so selfless that he would try to protect me—with his own life—from doing something in an uncontrolled split second that I would regret in agony forever? That went way beyond simply tolerating what I had become, or miraculously managing to stay my friend. Jacob was one of the best people I knew, but this seemed like too much to accept from anyone. His grin widened, and he shuddered slightly. "I gotta say it, Bells. You're a freak show."

I grinned back, falling easily into the old pattern. This was a side of him I understood. Edward growled. "Watch yourself, mongrel."

The wind blew from behind me and I quickly filled my lungs with the safe air so I could speak. "No, he's right. The eyes are really something, aren't they?"

"Super-creepy. But it's not as bad as I thought it would be."

"Gee—thanks for the amazing compliment!"

He rolled his eyes. "You know what I mean. You still look like you—sort of. Maybe it's not the look so much as... you are Bella. I didn't think it would feel like you were still here." He smiled at me again without a trace of bitterness or resentment anywhere in his face. Then he chuckled and said, "Anyway, I guess I'll get used to the eyes soon enough."

"You will?" I asked, confused. It was wonderful that we were still friends, but it wasn't like we'd be spending much time together.

The strangest look crossed his face, erasing the smile. It was almost… guilty? Then his eyes shifted to Edward.

“Thanks,” he said. “I didn’t know if you’d be able to keep it from her, promise or not. Usually, you just give her everything she wants.”

“Maybe I’m hoping she’ll get irritated and rip your head off,” Edward suggested. Jacob snorted.

“What’s going on? Are you two keeping secrets from me?” I demanded, incredulous.

“I’ll explain later,” Jacob said self-consciously—like he didn’t really plan on it. Then he changed the subject. “First, let’s get this show on the road.” His grin was a challenge now as he started slowly forward.

There was a whine of protest behind him, and then Leah’s gray body slid out of the trees behind him. The taller, sandy-colored Seth was right behind her.

“Cool it, guys,” Jacob said. “Stay out of this.”

I was glad they didn’t listen to him but only followed after him a little more slowly. The wind was still now; it wouldn’t blow his scent away from me. He got close enough that I could feel the heat of his body in the air between us. My throat burned in response.

“C’mon, Bells. Do your worst.”

Leah hissed.

I didn’t want to breathe. It wasn’t right to take such dangerous advantage of Jacob, no matter if he was

the one offering. But I couldn't get away from the logic. How else could I be sure that I wouldn't hurt Renesmee?

"I'm getting older here, Bella," Jacob taunted. "Okay, not technically, but you get the idea. Go on, take a whiff."

"Hold on to me," I said to Edward, cringing back into his chest. His hands tightened on my arms.

I locked my muscles in place, hoping I could keep them frozen. I resolved that I would do at least as well as I had on the hunt. Worst-case scenario, I would stop breathing and run for it. Nervously, I took a tiny breath in through my nose, braced for anything. It hurt a little, but my throat was already burning dully anyway. Jacob didn't smell that much more human than the mountain lion. There was an animal edge to his blood that instantly repelled. Though the loud, wet sound of his heart was appealing, the scent that went with it made my nose wrinkle. It was actually easier with the smell to temper my reaction to the sound and heat of his pulsing blood.

I took another breath and relaxed. "Huh. I can see what everyone's been going on about. You stink, Jacob."

Edward burst into laughter; his hands slipped from my shoulders to wrap around my waist. Seth barked a low chortle in harmony with Edward; he came a little closer while Leah retreated several paces. And then I was aware of another audience when I heard Emmett's low, distinct guffaw, muffled a little by the glass wall between us.

"Look who's talking," Jacob said, theatrically plugging his nose. His face didn't pucker at all while Edward embraced me, not even when Edward composed himself and whispered "I love you" in my ear. Jacob just kept grinning. This made me feel hopeful that things were going to be right between us, the way they hadn't been for so long now. Maybe now I could truly be his friend, since I disgusted him enough physically that he couldn't love me the same way as before. Maybe that was all that was needed.

"Okay, so I passed, right?" I said. "Now are you going to tell me what this big secret is?"

Jacob's expression became very nervous. "It's nothing you need to worry about this second. . . ."

I heard Emmett chuckle again—a sound of anticipation.

I would have pressed my point, but as I listened to Emmett, I heard other sounds, too. Seven people breathing. One set of lungs moving more rapidly than the others. Only one heart fluttering like a bird's wings, light and quick.

I was totally diverted. My daughter was just on the other side of that thin wall of glass. I couldn't see her—the light bounced off the reflective windows like a mirror. I could only see myself, looking very strange—so white and still—compared to Jacob. Or, compared to Edward, looking exactly right.

"Renesmee," I whispered. Stress made me a statue again. Renesmee wasn't going to smell like an animal. Would I put her in danger?

"Come and see," Edward murmured. "I know you can handle this."

"You'll help me?" I whispered through motionless lips.

"Of course I will."

"And Emmett and Jasper—just in case?"

"We'll take care of you, Bella. Don't worry, we'll be ready. None of us would risk Renesmee. I think you'll be surprised at how entirely she's already wrapped us all around her little fingers. She'll be perfectly safe, no matter what."

My yearning to see her, to understand the worship in his voice, broke my frozen pose. I took a step forward.

And then Jacob was in my way, his face a mask of worry.

"Are you sure, bloodsucker?" he demanded of Edward, his voice almost pleading. I'd never heard him speak to Edward that way. "I don't like this. Maybe she should wait—"

"You had your test, Jacob."

It was Jacob's test?

"But—," Jacob began.

"But nothing," Edward said, suddenly exasperated. "Bella needs to see our daughter. Get out of her way."

Jacob shot me an odd, frantic look and then turned and nearly sprinted into the house ahead of us.

Edward growled.

I couldn't make sense of their confrontation, and I couldn't concentrate on it, either. I could only think about the blurred child in my memory and struggle against the haziness, trying to remember her face exactly.

"Shall we?" Edward said, his voice gentle again.

I nodded nervously.

He took my hand tightly in his and led the way into the house.

They waited for me in a smiling line that was both welcoming and defensive. Rosalie was several paces behind the rest of them, near the front door. She was alone until Jacob joined her and then stood in front of her, closer than was normal. There was no sense of comfort in that closeness; both of them seemed to cringe from the proximity. Someone very small was leaning forward out of Rosalie's arms, peering around Jacob. Immediately, she had my absolute attention, my every thought, the way nothing else had owned them since the moment I'd opened my eyes.

"I was out just two days?" I gasped, disbelieving.

The stranger-child in Rosalie's arms had to be weeks, if not months, old. She was maybe twice the size of the baby in my dim memory, and she seemed to be supporting her own torso easily as she stretched toward me. Her shiny bronze-colored hair fell in ringlets past her shoulders. Her chocolate brown eyes examined me with an interest that was not at all childlike; it was adult, aware and intelligent. She raised one hand, reaching in my direction for a

moment, and then reached back to touch Rosalie's throat. If her face had not been astonishing in its beauty and perfection, I wouldn't have believed it was the same child. My child.

But Edward was there in her features, and I was there in the color of her eyes and cheeks. Even Charlie had a place in her thick curls, though their color matched Edward's. She must be ours. Impossible, but still true.

Seeing this unanticipated little person did not make her more real, though. It only made her more fantastic.

Rosalie patted the hand against her neck and murmured, "Yes, that's her."

Renesmee's eyes stayed locked on mine. Then, as she had just seconds after her violent birth, she smiled at me. A brilliant flash of tiny, perfect white teeth. Reeling inside, I took a hesitant step toward her.

Everyone moved very fast.

Emmett and Jasper were right in front of me, shoulder to shoulder, hands ready. Edward gripped me from behind, fingers tight again on the tops of my arms. Even Carlisle and Esme moved to get Emmett's and Jasper's flanks, while Rosalie backed to the door, her arms clutching at Renesmee. Jacob moved, too, keeping his protective stance in front of them.

Alice was the only one who held her place.

"Oh, give her some credit," she chided them. "She wasn't going to do anything. You'd want a closer look, too."

Alice was right. I was in control of myself. I'd been braced for anything—for a scent as impossibly insistent as the human smell in the woods. The temptation here was really not comparable. Renesmee's fragrance was perfectly balanced right on the line between the scent of the most beautiful perfume and the scent of the most delicious food. There was enough of the sweet vampire smell to keep the human part from being overwhelming.

I could handle it. I was sure.

"I'm okay," I promised, patting Edward's hand on my arm. Then I hesitated and added,

"Keep close, though, just in case."

Jasper's eyes were tight, focused. I knew he was taking in my emotional climate, and I worked on settling into a steady calm. I felt Edward free my arms as he read Jasper's assessment. But, though Jasper was getting it firsthand, he didn't seem as certain. When she heard my voice, the too-aware child struggled in Rosalie's arms, reaching toward me. Somehow, her expression managed to look impatient.

"Jazz, Em, let us through. Bella's got this."

"Edward, the risk—," Jasper said.

"Minimal. Listen, Jasper—on the hunt she caught the scent of some hikers who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. . . ."

I heard Carlisle suck in a shocked breath. Esme's face was suddenly full of concern mingled with compassion. Jasper's eyes widened, but he nodded just a tiny bit, as if Edward's words answered some question in his head. Jacob's mouth screwed up into a disgusted grimace. Emmett shrugged. Rosalie seemed even less concerned than Emmett as she tried to hold on to the struggling child in her arms.

Alice's expression told me that she was not fooled. Her narrowed eyes, focused with burning intensity on my borrowed shirt, seemed more worried about what I'd done to my dress than anything else.

"Edward!" Carlisle chastened. "How could you be so irresponsible?"

"I know, Carlisle, I know. I was just plain stupid. I should have taken the time to make sure we were in a safe zone before I set her loose."

"Edward," I mumbled, embarrassed by the way they stared at me. It was like they were trying to see a brighter red in my eyes.

"He's absolutely right to rebuke me, Bella," Edward said with a grin. "I made a huge mistake. The fact that you are stronger than anyone I've ever known doesn't change that."

Alice rolled her eyes. "Tasteful joke, Edward."

"I wasn't making a joke. I was explaining to Jasper why I know Bella can handle this. It's not my fault everyone jumped to conclusions."

"Wait," Jasper gasped. "She didn't hunt the humans?"

"She started to," Edward said, clearly enjoying himself. My teeth ground together. "She was entirely focused on the hunt."

"What happened?" Carlisle interjected. His eyes were suddenly bright, an amazed smile beginning to form on his face. It reminded me of before, when he'd wanted the details on my transformation experience. The thrill of new information. Edward leaned toward him, animated. "She heard me behind her and reacted defensively. As soon as my pursuit broke into her concentration, she snapped right out of it. I've never seen anything to equal her. She realized at once what was happening, and then… she held her breath and ran away."

"Whoa," Emmett murmured. "Seriously?"

"He's not telling it right," I muttered, more embarrassed than before. "He left out the part where I growled at him."

"Did ya get in a couple of good swipes?" Emmett asked eagerly.

"No! Of course not."

"No, not really? You really didn't attack him?"

"Emmett!" I protested.

"Aw, what a waste," Emmett groaned. "And here you're probably the one person who could take him—since he can't get in your head to cheat—and you had a perfect excuse, too." He sighed. "I've been dying to see how he'd do without that advantage."

I glared at him frostily. “I would never.”

Jasper’s frown caught my attention; he seemed even more disturbed than before. Edward touched his fist lightly to Jasper’s shoulder in a mock punch. “You see what I mean?”

“It’s not natural,” Jasper muttered.

“She could have turned on you—she’s only hours old!” Esme scolded, putting her hand against her heart. “Oh, we should have gone with you.”

I wasn’t paying so much attention, now that Edward was past the punch line of his joke. I was staring at the gorgeous child by the door, who was still staring at me. Her little dimpled hands reached out toward me like she knew exactly who I was. Automatically, my hand lifted to mimic hers.

“Edward,” I said, leaning around Jasper to see her better. “Please?”

Jasper’s teeth were set; he didn’t move.

“Jazz, this isn’t anything you’ve seen before,” Alice said quietly. “Trust me.”

Their eyes met for a short second, and then Jasper nodded. He moved out of my way, but put one hand on my shoulder and moved with me as I walked slowly forward. I thought about every step before I took it, analyzing my mood, the burn in my throat, the position of the others around me. How strong I felt versus how well they would be able to contain me. It was a slow procession.

And then the child in Rosalie's arms, struggling and reaching all this time while her expression got more and more irritated, let out a high, ringing wail. Everyone reacted as if—like me—they'd never heard her voice before.

They swarmed around her in a second, leaving me standing alone, frozen in place. The sound of Renesmee's cry pierced right through me, spearing me to the floor. My eyes pricked in the strangest way, like they wanted to tear.

It seemed like everyone had a hand on her, patting and soothing. Everyone but me.

"What's the matter? Is she hurt? What happened?"

It was Jacob's voice that was loudest, that raised anxiously above the others. I watched in shock as he reached for Renesmee, and then in utter horror as Rosalie surrendered her to him without a fight.

"No, she's fine," Rosalie reassured him.

Rosalie was reassuring Jacob?

Renesmee went to Jacob willingly enough, pushing her tiny hand against his cheek and then squirming around to stretch toward me again.

"See?" Rosalie told him. "She just wants Bella."

"She wants me?" I whispered.

Renesmee's eyes—my eyes—stared impatiently at me.

Edward darted back to my side. He put his hands lightly on my arms and urged me forward.

"She's been waiting for you for almost three days," he told me. We were only a few feet away from her now. Bursts of heat seemed to tremble out from her to touch me.

Or maybe it was Jacob who was trembling. I saw his hands shaking as I got closer. And yet, despite his obvious anxiety, his face was more serene than I had seen it in a long time.

"Jake—I'm fine," I told him. It made me panicky to see Renesmee in his shaking hands, but I worked to keep myself in control.

He frowned at me, eyes tight, like he was just as panicky at the thought of Renesmee in my arms.

Renesmee whimpered eagerly and stretched, her little hands grasping into fists again and again.

Something in me clicked into place at that moment. The sound of her cry, the familiarity of her eyes, the way she seemed even more impatient than I did for this reunion—all of it wove together into the most natural of patterns as she clutched the air between us. Suddenly, she was absolutely real, and of course I knew her. It was perfectly ordinary that I should take that last easy step and reach for her, putting my hands exactly where they would fit best as I pulled her gently toward me.

Jacob let his long arms stretch so that I could cradle her, but he didn't let go. He shuddered a little when our skin touched. His skin, always so warm to me before, felt like an open flame to me now. It was

almost the same temperature as Renesmee's. Perhaps one or two degrees difference.

Renesmee seemed oblivious to the coolness of my skin, or at least very used to it. She looked up and smiled at me again, showing her square little teeth and two dimples. Then, very deliberately, she reached for my face.

The moment she did this, all the hands on me tightened, anticipating my reaction. I barely noticed.

I was gasping, stunned and frightened by the strange, alarming image that filled my mind. It felt like a very strong memory—I could still see through my eyes while I watched it in my head—but it was completely unfamiliar. I stared through it to Renesmee's expectant expression, trying to understand what was happening, struggling desperately to hold on to my calm.

Besides being shocking and unfamiliar, the image was also wrong somehow—I almost recognized my own face in it, my old face, but it was off, backward. I grasped quickly that I was seeing my face as others saw it, rather than flipped in a reflection. My memory face was twisted, ravaged, covered in sweat and blood. Despite this, my expression in the vision became an adoring smile; my brown eyes glowed over their deep circles. The image enlarged, my face came closer to the unseen vantage point, and then abruptly vanished.

Renesmee's hand dropped from my cheek. She smiled wider, dimpling again. It was totally silent in the room but for the heartbeats. No one but Jacob and

Renesmee was so much as breathing. The silence stretched on; it seemed like they were waiting for me to say something.

“What… was… that?” I managed to choke out.

“What did you see?” Rosalie asked curiously, leaning around Jacob, who seemed very much in the way and out of place at the moment. “What did she show you?”

“She showed me that?” I whispered.

“I told you it was hard to explain,” Edward murmured in my ear. “But effective as means of communications go.”

“What was it?” Jacob asked.

I blinked quickly several times. “Um. Me. I think. But I looked terrible.”

“It was the only memory she had of you,” Edward explained. It was obvious he’d seen what she was showing me as she thought of it. He was still cringing, his voice rough from reliving the memory. “She’s letting you know that she’s made the connection, that she knows who you are.”

“But how did she do that?”

Renesmee seemed unconcerned with my boggling eyes. She was smiling slightly and pulling on a lock of my hair.

“How do I hear thoughts? How does Alice see the future?” Edward asked rhetorically, and then shrugged. “She’s gifted.”

"It's an interesting twist," Carlisle said to Edward. "Like she's doing the exact opposite of what you can."

"Interesting," Edward agreed. "I wonder. . . ."

I knew they were speculating away, but I didn't care. I was staring at the most beautiful face in the world. She was hot in my arms, reminding me of the moment when the blackness had almost won, when there was nothing in the world left to hold on to. Nothing strong enough to pull me through the crushing darkness. The moment when I'd thought of Renesmee and found something I would never let go of.

"I remember you, too," I told her quietly.

It seemed very natural to lean in and press my lips to her forehead. She smelled wonderful. The scent of her skin set my throat burning, but it was easy to ignore. It didn't strip the joy from the moment. Renesmee was real and I knew her. She was the same one I'd fought for from the beginning. My little nudger, the one who loved me from the inside, too. Half Edward, perfect and lovely. And half me—which, surprisingly, made her better rather than detracting.

I'd been right all along. She was worth the fight.

"She's fine," Alice murmured, probably to Jasper. I could feel them hovering, not trusting me.

"Haven't we experimented enough for one day?" Jacob asked, his voice a slightly higher pitch with stress. "Okay, Bella's doing great, but let's not push it."

I glared at him with real irritation. Jasper shuffled uneasily next to me. We were all crowded so close that every tiny movement seemed very big.

“What is your problem, Jacob?” I demanded. I tugged lightly against his hold on Renesmee, and he just stepped closer to me. He was pressed right up to me, Renesmee touching both of our chests.

Edward hissed at him. “Just because I understand, it doesn’t mean I won’t throw you out, Jacob. Bella’s doing extraordinarily well. Don’t ruin the moment for her.”

“I’ll help him toss you, dog,” Rosalie promised, her voice seething. “I owe you a good kick in the gut.” Obviously, there was no change in that relationship, unless it had gotten worse.

I glared at Jacob’s anxious half-angry expression. His eyes were locked on Renesmee’s face. With everyone pressed together, he had to be touching at least six different vampires at the moment, and it didn’t even seem to bug him.

Would he really go through all this just to protect me from myself? What could have happened during my transformation—my alteration into something he hated—that would soften him so much toward the reason for its necessity?

I puzzled over it, watching him stare at my daughter. Staring at her like… like he was a blind man seeing the sun for the very first time.

“No!” I gasped.

Jasper's teeth came together and Edward's arms wrapped around my chest like constricting boas. Jacob had Renesmee out of my arms in the same second, and I did not try to hold on to her. Because I felt it coming—the snap that they'd all been waiting for.

"Rose," I said through my teeth, very slowly and precisely. "Take Renesmee."

Rosalie held her hands out, and Jacob handed my daughter to her at once. Both of them backed away from me.

"Edward, I don't want to hurt you, so please let go of me."

He hesitated.

"Go stand in front of Renesmee," I suggested.

He deliberated, and then let me go.

I leaned into my hunting crouch and took two slow steps forward toward Jacob.

"You didn't," I snarled at him.

He backed away, palms up, trying to reason with me. "You know it's not something I can control."

"You stupid mutt! How could you? My baby! "

He backed out the front door now as I stalked him, half-running backward down the stairs. "It wasn't my idea, Bella!"

"I've held her all of one time, and already you think you have some moronic wolfy claim to her? She's mine."

"I can share," he said pleadingly as he retreated across the lawn.

"Pay up," I heard Emmett say behind me. A small part of my brain wondered who had bet against this outcome. I didn't waste much attention on it. I was too furious.

"How dare you imprint on my baby? Have you lost your mind?"

"It was involuntary!" he insisted, backing into the trees.

Then he wasn't alone. The two huge wolves reappeared, flanking him on either side. Leah snapped at me.

A fearsome snarl ripped through my teeth back at her. The sound disturbed me, but not enough to stop my advance.

"Bella, would you try to listen for just a second? Please?" Jacob begged. "Leah, back off," he added.

Leah curled her lip at me and didn't move.

"Why should I listen?" I hissed. Fury reigned in my head. It clouded everything else out.

"Because you're the one who told me this. Do you remember? You said we belonged in each other's lives, right? That we were family. You said that was

how you and I were supposed to be. So… now we are. It's what you wanted."

I glared ferociously. I did dimly remember those words. But my new quick brain was two steps ahead of his nonsense.

"You think you'll be part of my family as my son-in-law!" I screeched. My bell voice ripped through two octaves and still came out sounding like music. Emmett laughed.

"Stop her, Edward," Esme murmured. "She'll be unhappy if she hurts him."

But I felt no pursuit behind me.

"No!" Jacob was insisting at the same time. "How can you even look at it that way?

She's just a baby, for crying out loud!"

"That's my point!" I yelled.

"You know I don't think of her that way! Do you think Edward would have let me live this long if I did? All I want is for her to be safe and happy—is that so bad? So different from what you want?" He was shouting right back at me.

Beyond words, I shrieked a growl at him.

"Amazing, isn't she?" I heard Edward murmur.

"She hasn't gone for his throat even once," Carlisle agreed, sounding stunned.

"Fine, you win this one," Emmett said grudgingly.

"You're going to stay away from her," I hissed up at Jacob.

"I can't do that!"

Through my teeth: "Try. Starting now."

"It's not possible. Do you remember how much you wanted me around three days ago?

How hard it was to be apart from each other? That's gone for you now, isn't it?"

I glared, not sure what he was implying.

"That was her," he told me. "From the very beginning. We had to be together, even then."

I remembered, and then I understood; a tiny part of me was relieved to have the madness explained. But that relief somehow only made me angrier. Was he expecting that to be enough for me? That one little clarification would make me okay with this?

"Run away while you still can," I threatened.

"C'mon, Bells! Nessie likes me, too," he insisted.

I froze. My breathing stopped. Behind me, I heard the lack of sound that was their anxious reaction.

"What… did you call her?"

Jacob took a step farther back, managing to look sheepish. "Well," he mumbled, "that name you came up with is kind of a mouthful and—"

“You nicknamed my daughter after the Loch Ness Monster?” I screeched. And then I lunged for his throat.

# Chapter 23

## MEMORIES

"I'm so sorry, Seth. I should have been closer."

Edward was still apologizing, and I didn't think that was either fair or appropriate. After all, Edward hadn't completely and inexcusably lost control of his temper. Edward hadn't tried to rip Jacob's head off—Jacob, who wouldn't even phase to protect himself

—and then accidentally broken Seth's shoulder and collarbone when he jumped in between. Edward hadn't almost killed his best friend.

Not that the best friend didn't have a few things to answer for, but, obviously, nothing Jacob had done could have mitigated my behavior.

So shouldn't I have been the one apologizing? I tried again.

"Seth, I—"

"Don't worry about it, Bella, I'm totally fine," Seth said at the same time that Edward said, "Bella, love, no one is judging you. You're doing so well."

They hadn't let me finish a sentence yet.

It only made it worse that Edward was having a difficult time keeping the smile off his face. I knew that Jacob didn't deserve my overreaction, but Edward seemed to find something satisfying in it. Maybe he was just wishing that he had the excuse of

being a newborn so that he could do something physical about his irritation with Jacob, too. I tried to erase the anger from my system entirely, but it was hard, knowing that Jacob was outside with Renesmee right now. Keeping her safe from me, the crazed newborn. Carlisle secured another piece of the brace to Seth's arm, and Seth winced.

"Sorry, sorry!" I mumbled, knowing I'd never get a fully articulated apology out.

"Don't freak, Bella," Seth said, patting my knee with his good hand while Edward rubbed my arm from the other side.

Seth seemed to feel no aversion to having me sit beside him on the sofa as Carlisle treated him. "I'll be back to normal in half an hour," he continued, still patting my knee as if oblivious to the cold, hard texture of it. "Anyone would have done the same, what with Jake and Ness—" He broke off mid-word and changed the subject quickly. "I mean, at least you didn't bite me or anything. That would've sucked."

I buried my face in my hands and shuddered at the thought, at the very real possibility. It could have happened so easily. And werewolves didn't react to vampire venom the same way humans did, they'd told me only now. It was poison to them.

"I'm a bad person."

"Of course you aren't. I should have—," Edward started.

“Stop that,” I sighed. I didn’t want him taking the blame for this the way he always took everything on himself.

“Lucky thing Ness—Renesmee’s not venomous,” Seth said after a second of awkward silence. “’Cause she bites Jake all the time.”

My hands dropped. “She does?”

“Sure. Whenever he and Rose don’t get dinner in her mouth fast enough. Rose thinks it’s pretty hilarious.”

I stared at him, shocked, and also feeling guilty, because I had to admit that this pleased me a teensy bit in a petulant way.

Of course, I already knew that Renesmee wasn’t venomous. I was the first person she’d bitten. I didn’t make this observation aloud, as I was feigning memory loss on those recent events.

“Well, Seth,” Carlisle said, straightening up and stepping away from us. “I think that’s as much as I can do. Try to not move for, oh, a few hours, I guess.” Carlisle chuckled. “I wish treating humans were this instantaneously gratifying.” He rested his hand for a moment on Seth’s black hair. “Stay still,” he ordered, and then he disappeared upstairs. I heard his office door close, and I wondered if they’d already removed the evidence of my time there.

“I can probably manage sitting still for a while,” Seth agreed after Carlisle was already gone, and then he yawned hugely. Carefully, making sure not to tweak his shoulder, Seth leaned his head against the sofa’s

back and closed his eyes. Seconds later, his mouth fell slack.

I frowned at his peaceful face for another minute. Like Jacob, Seth seemed to have the gift of falling asleep at will. Knowing I wouldn't be able to apologize again for a while, I got up; the motion didn't jostle the couch in the slightest. Everything physical was so easy. But the rest…

Edward followed me to the back windows and took my hand.

Leah was pacing along the river, stopping every now and then to look at the house. It was easy to tell when she was looking for her brother and when she was looking for me. She alternated between anxious glances and murderous glares.

I could hear Jacob and Rosalie outside on the front steps bickering quietly over whose turn it was to feed Renesmee. Their relationship was as antagonistic as ever; the only thing they agreed on now was that I should be kept away from my baby until I was one hundred percent recovered from my temper tantrum. Edward had disputed their verdict, but I'd let it go. I wanted to be sure, too. I was worried, though, that my one hundred percent sure and their one hundred percent sure might be very different things. Other than their squabbling, Seth's slow breathing, and Leah's annoyed panting, it was very quiet. Emmett, Alice, and Esme were hunting. Jasper had stayed behind to watch me. He stood unobtrusively behind the newel post now, trying not to be obnoxious about it.

I took advantage of the calm to think of all the things Edward and Seth had told me while Carlisle splinted Seth's arm. I'd missed a whole lot while I was burning, and this was the first real chance to catch up.

The main thing was the end of the feud with Sam's pack—which was why the others felt safe to come and go as they pleased again. The truce was stronger than ever. Or more binding, depending on your viewpoint, I imagined.

Binding, because the most absolute of all the pack's laws was that no wolf ever kill the object of another wolf's imprinting. The pain of such a thing would be intolerable for the whole pack. The fault, whether intended or accidental, could not be forgiven; the wolves involved would fight to the death—there was no other option. It had happened long ago, Seth told me, but only accidentally. No wolf would ever intentionally destroy a brother that way.

So Renesmee was untouchable because of the way Jacob now felt about her. I tried to concentrate on the relief of this fact rather than the chagrin, but it wasn't easy. My mind had enough room to feel both emotions intensely at the same time. And Sam couldn't get mad about my transformation, either, because Jacob—speaking as the rightful Alpha—had allowed it. It rankled to realize over and over again how much I owed Jacob when I just wanted to be mad at him.

I deliberately redirected my thoughts in order to control my emotions. I considered another interesting

phenomenon; though the silence between the separate packs continued, Jacob and Sam had discovered that Alphas could speak to each other while in their wolf form. It wasn't the same as before; they couldn't hear every thought the way they had prior to the split. It was more like speaking aloud, Seth had said. Sam could only hear the thoughts Jacob wanted to share, and vice versa. They found they could communicate over distance, too, now that they were talking to each other again. They hadn't found all this out until Jacob had gone alone—over Seth's and Leah's objections—to explain to Sam about Renesmee; it was the only time he'd left Renesmee since first laying eyes on her.

Once Sam had understood how absolutely everything had changed, he'd come back with Jacob to talk to Carlisle. They'd spoken in human form (Edward had refused to leave my side to translate), and the treaty had been renewed. The friendly feeling of the relationship, however, might never be the same.

One big worry down.

But there was another that, though not as physically dangerous as an angry wolf pack, still seemed more urgent to me.

Charlie.

He'd spoken to Esme earlier this morning, but that hadn't kept him from calling again, twice, just a few minutes ago while Carlisle treated Seth. Carlisle and Edward had let the phone ring.

What would be the right thing to tell him? Were the Cullens right? Was telling him that I'd died the best, the kindest way? Would I be able to lie still in a coffin while he and my mother cried over me?

It didn't seem right to me. But putting Charlie or Renée in danger of the Volturi's obsession with secrecy was clearly out of the question.

There was still my idea—let Charlie see me, when I was ready for that, and let him make his own wrong assumptions. Technically, the vampire rules would remain unbroken. Wouldn't it be better for Charlie if he knew that I was alive—sort of—and happy? Even if I was strange and different and probably frightening to him?

My eyes, in particular, were much too frightening right now. How long before my selfcontrol and my eye color were ready for Charlie?

"What's the matter, Bella?" Jasper asked quietly, reading my growing tension. "No one is angry with you"—a low snarl from the riverside contradicted him, but he ignored it

—"or even surprised, really. Well, I suppose we are surprised. Surprised that you were able to snap out of it so quickly. You did well. Better than anyone expects of you."

While he was speaking, the room became very calm. Seth's breathing slipped into a low snore. I felt more peaceful, but I didn't forget my anxieties.

"I was thinking about Charlie, actually."

Out front, the bickering cut off.

“Ah,” Jasper murmured.

“We really have to leave, don’t we?” I asked. “For a while, at the very least. Pretend we’re in Atlanta or something.”

I could feel Edward’s gaze locked on my face, but I looked at Jasper. He was the one who answered me in a grave tone.

“Yes. It’s the only way to protect your father.”

I brooded for a moment. “I’m going to miss him so much. I’ll miss everyone here.”

Jacob, I thought, despite myself. Though that yearning was both vanished and defined

—and I was vastly relieved that it was—he was still my friend. Someone who knew the real me and accepted her. Even as a monster.

I thought about what Jacob had said, pleading with me before I’d attacked him. You said we belonged in each other’s lives, right? That we were family. You said that was how you and I were supposed to be. So… now we are. It’s what you wanted. But it didn’t feel like how I’d wanted it. Not exactly. I remembered further back, to the fuzzy, weak memories of my human life. Back to the very hardest part to remember—

the time without Edward, a time so dark I’d tried to bury it in my head. I couldn’t get the words exactly right; I only remembered wishing that Jacob were my

brother so that we could love each other without any confusion or pain. Family. But I'd never factored a daughter into the equation.

I remembered a little later—one of the many times that I'd told Jacob goodbye—

wondering aloud who he would end up with, who would make his life right after what I'd done to it. I had said something about how whoever she was, she wouldn't be good enough for him.

I snorted, and Edward raised one eyebrow questioningly. I just shook my head at him. But as much as I might miss my friend, I knew there was a bigger problem. Had Sam or Jared or Quil ever gone a whole day without seeing the objects of their fixations, Emily, Kim, and Claire? Could they? What would the separation from Renesmee do to Jacob?

Would it cause him pain?

There was still enough petty ire in my system to make me glad, not for his pain, but for the idea of having Renesmee away from him. How was I supposed to deal with having her belong to Jacob when she only barely seemed to belong to me?

The sound of movement on the front porch interrupted my thoughts. I heard them get up, and then they were through the door. At exactly the same time, Carlisle came down the stairs with his hands full of odd things—a measuring tape, a scale. Jasper darted to my side. As if there was some signal I'd missed, even Leah sat down outside and stared through the window with an expression like she was

expecting something that was both familiar and also totally uninteresting.

“Must be six,” Edward said.

“So?” I asked, my eyes locked on Rosalie, Jacob, and Renesmee. They stood in the doorway, Renesmee in Rosalie’s arms. Rose looked wary. Jacob looked troubled. Renesmee looked beautiful and impatient.

“Time to measure Ness—er, Renesmee,” Carlisle explained.

“Oh. You do this every day?”

“Four times a day,” Carlisle corrected absently as he motioned the others toward the couch. I thought I saw Renesmee sigh.

“Four times? Every day? Why?”

“She’s still growing quickly,” Edward murmured to me, his voice quiet and strained. He squeezed my hand, and his other arm wrapped securely around my waist, almost as if he needed the support.

I couldn’t take my eyes off Renesmee to check his expression.

She looked perfect, absolutely healthy. Her skin glowed like backlit alabaster; the color in her cheeks was rose petals against it. There couldn’t be anything wrong with such radiant beauty. Surely there could be nothing more dangerous in her life than her mother. Could there?

The difference between the child I'd given birth to and the one I'd met again an hour ago would have been obvious to anyone. The difference between Renesmee an hour ago and Renesmee now was subtler. Human eyes never would have detected it. But it was there.

Her body was slightly longer. Just a little bit slimmer. Her face wasn't quite as round; it was more oval by one minute degree. Her ringlets hung a sixteenth of an inch lower down her shoulders. She stretched out helpfully in Rosalie's arms while Carlisle ran the tape measure down the length of her and then used it to circle her head. He took no notes; perfect recall.

I was aware that Jacob's arms were crossed as tightly over his chest as Edward's arms were locked around me. His heavy brows were mashed together into one line over his deep-set eyes.

She had matured from a single cell to a normal-sized baby in the course of a few weeks. She looked well on her way to being a toddler just days after her birth. If this rate of growth held…

My vampire mind had no trouble with the math.

"What do we do?" I whispered, horrified.

Edward's arms tightened. He understood exactly what I was asking. "I don't know."

"It's slowing," Jacob muttered through his teeth.

"We'll need several more days of measurements to track the trend, Jacob. I can't make any promises."

"Yesterday she grew two inches. Today it's less."

"By a thirty-second of an inch, if my measurements are perfect," Carlisle said quietly.

"Be perfect, Doc," Jacob said, making the words almost threatening. Rosalie stiffened.

"You know I'll do my best," Carlisle assured him.

Jacob sighed. "Guess that's all I can ask."

I felt irritated again, like Jacob was stealing my lines—and delivering them all wrong. Renesmee seemed irritated, too. She started to squirm and then reached her hand imperiously toward Rosalie. Rosalie leaned forward so that Renesmee could touch her face. After a second, Rose sighed.

"What does she want?" Jacob demanded, taking my line again.

"Bella, of course," Rosalie told him, and her words made my insides feel a little warmer. Then she looked at me. "How are you?"

"Worried," I admitted, and Edward squeezed me.

"We all are. But that's not what I meant."

"I'm in control," I promised. Thirstiness was way down the list right now. Besides, Renesmee smelled good in a very non-food way.

Jacob bit his lip but made no move to stop Rosalie as she offered Renesmee to me. Jasper and Edward hovered but allowed it. I could see how tense Rose was, and I wondered how the room felt to Jasper right

now. Or was he focusing so hard on me that he couldn't feel the others?

Renesmee reached for me as I reached for her, a blinding smile lighting her face. She fit so easily in my arms, like they'd been shaped just for her. Immediately, she put her hot little hand against my cheek.

Though I was prepared, it still made me gasp to see the memory like a vision in my head. So bright and colorful but also completely transparent.

She was remembering me charging Jacob across the front lawn, remembering Seth leaping between us. She'd seen and heard it all with perfect clarity. It didn't look like me, this graceful predator leaping at her prey like an arrow arcing from a bow. It had to be someone else. That made me feel a very small bit less guilty as Jacob stood there defenselessly with his hands raised in front of him. His hands did not tremble. Edward chuckled, watching Renesmee's thoughts with me. And then we both winced as we heard the crack of Seth's bones.

Renesmee smiled her brilliant smile, and her memory eyes did not leave Jacob through all the following mess. I tasted a new flavor to the memory—not exactly protective, more possessive—as she watched Jacob. I got the distinct impression that she was glad Seth had put himself in front of my spring. She didn't want Jacob hurt. He was hers.

"Oh, wonderful," I groaned. "Perfect."

“It’s just because he tastes better than the rest of us,” Edward assured me, voice stiff with his own annoyance.

“I told you she likes me, too,” Jacob teased from across the room, his eyes on Renesmee. His joking was halfhearted; the tense angle of his eyebrows had not relaxed. Renesmee patted my face impatiently, demanding my attention. Another memory: Rosalie pulling a brush gently through each of her curls. It felt nice. Carlisle and his tape measure, knowing she had to stretch and be still. It was not interesting to her.

“It looks like she’s going to give you a rundown of everything you missed,” Edward commented in my ear.

My nose wrinkled as she dumped the next one on me. The smell coming from a strange metal cup—hard enough not to be bitten through easily—sent a flash burn through my throat. Ouch.

And then Renesmee was out of my arms, which were pinned behind my back. I didn’t struggle with Jasper; I just looked at Edward’s frightened face.

“What did I do?”

Edward looked at Jasper behind me, and then at me again.

“But she was remembering being thirsty,” Edward muttered, his forehead pressing into lines. “She was remembering the taste of human blood.”

Jasper's arms pulled mine tighter together. Part of my head noted that this wasn't particularly uncomfortable, let alone painful, as it would have been to a human. It was just annoying. I was sure I could break his hold, but I didn't fight it.

"Yes," I agreed. "And?"

Edward frowned at me for a second more, and then his expression loosened. He laughed once. "And nothing at all, it seems. The overreaction is mine this time. Jazz, let her go."

The binding hands disappeared. I reached out for Renesmee as soon as I was free. Edward handed her to me without hesitation.

"I can't understand," Jasper said. "I can't bear this."

I watched in surprise as Jasper strode out the back door. Leah moved to give him a wide margin of space as he paced to the river and then launched himself over it in one bound. Renesmee touched my neck, repeating the scene of departure right back, like an instant replay. I could feel the question in her thought, an echo of mine. I was already over the shock of her odd little gift. It seemed an entirely natural part of her, almost to be expected. Maybe now that I was part of the supernatural myself, I would never be a skeptic again.

But what was wrong with Jasper?

"He'll be back," Edward said, whether to me or Renesmee, I wasn't sure. "He just needs a moment

alone to readjust his perspective on life." There was a grin threatening at the corners of his mouth.

Another human memory—Edward telling me that Jasper would feel better about himself if I "had a hard time adjusting" to being a vampire. This was in the context of a discussion about how many people I would kill my first newborn year.

"Is he mad at me?" I asked quietly.

Edward's eyes widened. "No. Why would he be?"

"What's the matter with him, then?"

"He's upset with himself, not you, Bella. He's worrying about… self-fulfilling prophecy, I suppose you could say."

"How so?" Carlisle asked before I could.

"He's wondering if the newborn madness is really as difficult as we've always thought, or if, with the right focus and attitude, anyone could do as well as Bella. Even now—

perhaps he only has such difficulty because he believes it's natural and unavoidable. Maybe if he expected more of himself, he would rise to those expectations. You're making him question a lot of deep-rooted assumptions, Bella."

"But that's unfair," Carlisle said. "Everyone is different; everyone has their own challenges. Perhaps what Bella is doing goes beyond the natural. Maybe this is her gift, so to speak."

I froze with surprise. Renesmee felt the change, and touched me. She remembered the last second of time and wondered why.

“That’s an interesting theory, and quite plausible,” Edward said. For a tiny space, I was disappointed. What? No magic visions, no formidable offensive abilities like, oh, shooting lightning bolts from my eyes or something? Nothing helpful or cool at all?

And then I realized what that might mean, if my “superpower” was no more than exceptional self-control.

For one thing, at least I had a gift. It could have been nothing. But, much more than that, if Edward was right, then I could skip right over the part I’d feared the very most.

What if I didn’t have to be a newborn? Not in the crazed killing-machine sense, anyway. What if I could fit right in with the Cullens from my first day? What if we didn’t have to hide out somewhere remote for a year while I “grew up”? What if, like Carlisle, I never killed a single person? What if I could be a good vampire right away?

I could see Charlie.

I sighed as soon as reality filtered through hope. I couldn’t see Charlie right away. The eyes, the voice, the perfected face. What could I possibly say to him; how could I even begin? I was furtively glad that I had some excuses for putting things off for a while; as much as I wanted to find some way to keep Charlie in my life, I was terrified of that first meeting. Seeing his

eyes pop as he took in my new face, my new skin. Knowing that he was frightened. Wondering what dark explanation would form in his head. I was chicken enough to wait for a year while my eyes cooled. And here I'd thought I would be so fearless when I was indestructible.

"Have you ever seen an equivalent to self-control as a talent?" Edward asked Carlisle.

"Do you really think that's a gift, or just a product of all her preparation?"

Carlisle shrugged. "It's slightly similar to what Siobhan has always been able to do, though she wouldn't call it a gift."

"Siobhan, your friend in that Irish coven?" Rosalie asked. "I wasn't aware that she did anything special. I thought it was Maggie who was talented in that bunch."

"Yes, Siobhan thinks the same. But she has this way of deciding her goals and then almost… willing them into reality. She considers it good planning, but I've always wondered if it was something more. When she included Maggie, for instance. Liam was very territorial, but Siobhan wanted it to work out, and so it did."

Edward, Carlisle, and Rosalie settled into chairs as they continued with the discussion. Jacob sat next to Seth protectively, looking bored. From the way his eyelids drooped, I was sure he'd be unconscious momentarily.

I listened, but my attention was divided. Renesmee was still telling me about her day. I held her by the window wall, my arms rocking her automatically as we stared into each other's eyes.

I realized that the others had no reason for sitting down. I was perfectly comfortable standing. It was just as restful as stretching out on a bed would be. I knew I would be able to stand like this for a week without moving and I would feel just as relaxed at the end of the seven days as I did at the beginning.

They must sit out of habit. Humans would notice someone standing for hours without ever shifting her weight to a different foot. Even now, I saw Rosalie brush her fingers against her hair and Carlisle cross his legs. Little motions to keep from being too still, too much a vampire. I would have to pay attention to what they did and start practicing. I rolled my weight back to my left leg. It felt kind of silly.

Maybe they were just trying to give me a little alone time with my baby—as alone as was safe.

Renesmee told me about every minute happening of the day, and I got the feeling from the tenor of her little stories that she wanted me to know her every bit as much I wanted the same thing. It worried her that I had missed things—like the sparrows that had hopped closer and closer when Jacob had held her, both of them very still beside one of the big hemlocks; the birds wouldn't come close to Rosalie. Or the outrageously icky white stuff—baby formula—that Carlisle had put in her cup; it smelled like sour dirt. Or the song Edward had crooned to her that was so

perfect Renesmee played it for me twice; I was surprised that I was in the background of that memory, perfectly motionless but looking fairly battered still. I shuddered, remembering that time from my own perspective. The hideous fire…

After almost an hour—the others were still deeply absorbed in their discussion, Seth and Jacob snoring in harmony on the couch—Renesmee's memory stories began to slow. They got slightly blurry around the edges and drifted out of focus before they came to their conclusions. I was about to interrupt Edward in a panic—was there something wrong with her?—when her eyelids fluttered and closed. She yawned, her plump pink lips stretching into a round O, and her eyes never reopened. Her hand fell away from my face as she drifted to sleep—the backs of her eyelids were the pale lavender color of thin clouds before the sunrise. Careful not to disturb her, I lifted that hand back to my skin and held it there curiously. At first there was nothing, and then, after a few minutes, a flickering of colors like a handful of butterflies were scattering from her thoughts.

Mesmerized, I watched her dreams. There was no sense to it. Just colors and shapes and faces. I was pleased by how often my face—both of my faces, hideous human and glorious immortal—cropped up in her unconscious thoughts. More than Edward or Rosalie. I was neck and neck with Jacob; I tried not to let that get to me. For the first time, I understood how Edward had been able to watch me sleep night after boring night, just to hear me talk in my sleep. I could watch Renesmee dream forever. The change in

Edward's tone caught my attention when he said, "Finally," and turned to gaze out the window. It was deep, purply night outside, but I could see just as far as before. Nothing was hidden in the darkness; everything had just changed colors. Leah, still glowering, got up and slunk into the brush just as Alice came into view on the other side of the river. Alice swung back and forth from a branch like a trapeze artist, toes touching hands, before throwing her body into a graceful flat spin over the river. Esme made a more traditional leap, while Emmett charged right through the water, splashing water so far that splatters hit the back windows. To my surprise, Jasper followed after, his own efficient leap seeming understated, even subtle, after the others. The huge grin stretching Alice's face was familiar in a dim, odd way. Everyone was suddenly smiling at me—Esme sweet, Emmett excited, Rosalie a little superior, Carlisle indulgent, and Edward expectant.

Alice skipped into the room ahead of everyone else, her hand stretched out in front of her and impatience making a nearly visible aura around her. In her palm was an everyday brass key with an oversized pink satin bow tied around it. She held the key out for me, and I automatically gripped Renesmee more securely in my right arm so that I could open my left. Alice dropped the key into it.

"Happy birthday!" she squealed.

I rolled my eyes. "No one starts counting on the actual day of birth," I reminded her.

"Your first birthday is at the year mark, Alice."

Her grin turned smug. “We’re not celebrating your vampire birthday. Yet. It’s September thirteenth, Bella. Happy nineteenth birthday!”

# Chapter 24

## SURPRISE

“No. No way!” I shook my head fiercely and then shot a glance at the smug smile on my seventeen-year-old husband’s face. “No, this doesn’t count. I stopped aging three days ago. I am eighteen forever.”

“Whatever,” Alice said, dismissing my protest with a quick shrug. “We’re celebrating anyway, so suck it up.”

I sighed. There was rarely a point to arguing with Alice.

Her grin got impossibly wider as she read the acquiescence in my eyes.

“Are you ready to open your present?” Alice sang.

“Present s,” Edward corrected, and he pulled another key—this one longer and silver with a less gaudy blue bow—from his pocket.

I struggled to keep from rolling my eyes. I knew immediately what this key was to—the

“after car.” I wondered if I should feel excited. It seemed the vampire conversion hadn’t given me any sudden interest in sports cars.

“Mine first,” Alice said, and then stuck her tongue out, foreseeing his answer.

“Mine is closer.”

"But look at how she's dressed." Alice's words were almost a moan. "It's been killing me all day. That is clearly the priority."

My eyebrows pulled together as I wondered how a key could get me into new clothes. Had she gotten me a whole trunkful?

"I know—I'll play you for it," Alice suggested. "Rock, paper, scissors."

Jasper chuckled and Edward sighed.

"Why you don't you just tell me who wins?" Edward said wryly.

Alice beamed. "I do. Excellent."

"It's probably better that I wait for morning, anyway." Edward smiled crookedly at me and then nodded toward Jacob and Seth, who looked like they were crashed for the night; I wonder how long they'd stayed up this time. "I think it might be more fun if Jacob was awake for the big reveal, don't you agree? So that someone there is able to express the right level of enthusiasm?"

I grinned back. He knew me well.

"Yay," Alice sang. "Bella, give Ness—Renesmee to Rosalie."

"Where does she usually sleep?"

Alice shrugged. "In Rose's arms. Or Jacob's. Or Esme's. You get the picture. She has never been set

down in her entire life. She's going to be the most spoiled half-vampire in existence."

Edward laughed while Rosalie took Renesmee expertly in her arms. "She is also the most un spoiled half-vampire in existence," Rosalie said. "The beauty of being one of a kind."

Rosalie grinned at me, and I was glad to see that the new comradeship between us was still there in her smile. I hadn't been entirely sure it would last after Renesmee's life was no longer tied to mine. But maybe we had fought together on the same side long enough that we would always be friends now. I'd finally made the same choice she would have if she'd been in my shoes. That seemed to have washed away her resentment for all my other choices.

Alice shoved the beribboned key in my hand, then grabbed my elbow and steered me toward the back door. "Let's go, let's go," she trilled.

"Is it outside?"

"Sort of," Alice said, pushing me forward.

"Enjoy your gift," Rosalie said. "It's from all of us. Esme especially."

"Aren't you coming, too?" I realized that no one had moved.

"We'll give you a chance to appreciate it alone," Rosalie said. "You can tell us about it… later."

Emmett guffawed. Something about his laugh made me feel like blushing, though I wasn't sure why.

I realized that lots of things about me—like truly hating surprises, and not liking gifts in general much more—had not changed one bit. It was a relief and revelation to discover how much of my essential core traits had come with me into this new body. I hadn't expected to be myself. I smiled widely.

Alice tugged my elbow, and I couldn't stop smiling as I followed her into the purple night. Only Edward came with us.

"There's the enthusiasm I'm looking for," Alice murmured approvingly. Then she dropped my arm, made two lithe bounds, and leaped over the river.

"C'mon, Bella," she called from the other side.

Edward jumped at the same time I did; it was every bit as fun as it had been this afternoon. Maybe a little bit more fun because the night changed everything into new, rich colors.

Alice took off with us on her heels, heading due north. It was easier to follow the sound of her feet whispering against the ground and the fresh path of her scent than it was to keep my eyes on her through the thick vegetation.

At no sign I could see, she whirled and dashed back to where I paused.

"Don't attack me," she warned, and sprang at me.

"What are you doing?" I demanded, squirming as she scrambled onto my back and wrapped her hands around my face. I felt the urge to throw her off, but I controlled it.

“Making sure you can’t see.”

“I could take care of that without the theatrics,” Edward offered.

“You might let her cheat. Take her hand and lead her forward.”

“Alice, I—”

“Don’t bother, Bella. We’re doing this my way.”

I felt Edward’s fingers weave through mine. “Just a few seconds more, Bella. Then she’ll go annoy someone else.” He pulled me forward. I kept up easily. I wasn’t afraid of hitting a tree; the tree would be the only one getting hurt in that scenario.

“You might be a little more appreciative,” Alice chided him. “This is as much for you as it is for her.”

“True. Thank you again, Alice.”

“Yeah, yeah. Okay.” Alice’s voice suddenly shot up with excitement. “Stop there. Turn her just a little to the right. Yes, like that. Okay. Are you ready?” she squeaked.

“I’m ready.” There were new scents here, piquing my interest, increasing my curiosity. Scents that didn’t belong in the deep woods. Honeysuckle. Smoke. Roses. Sawdust?

Something metallic, too. The richness of deep earth, dug up and exposed. I leaned toward the mystery.

Alice hopped down from my back, releasing her grip on my eyes.

I stared into the violet dark. There, nestled into a small clearing in the forest, was a tiny stone cottage, lavender gray in the light of the stars.

It belonged here so absolutely that it seemed as if it must have grown from the rock, a natural formation. Honeysuckle climbed up one wall like a lattice, winding all the way up and over the thick wooden shingles. Late summer roses bloomed in a handkerchiefsized garden under the dark, deep-set windows. There was a little path of flat stones, amethyst in the night, that led up to the quaint arched wooden door. I curled my hand around the key I held, shocked.

“What do you think?” Alice’s voice was soft now; it fit with the perfect quiet of the storybook scene.

I opened my mouth but said nothing.

“Esme thought we might like a place of our own for a while, but she didn’t want us too far away,” Edward murmured. “And she loves any excuse to renovate. This little place has been crumbling away out here for at least a hundred years.”

I continued staring, mouth gaping like a fish.

“Don’t you like it?” Alice’s face fell. “I mean, I’m sure we could fix it up differently, if you want. Emmett was all for adding a few thousand square feet, a second story, columns, and a tower, but Esme thought you would like it best the way it was meant to look.” Her voice started to climb, to go faster. “If she was wrong, we can get back to work. It won’t take long to—”

"Shh!" I managed.

She pressed her lips together and waited. It took me a few seconds to recover.

"You're giving me a house for my birthday?" I whispered.

"Us," Edward corrected. "And it's no more than a cottage. I think the word house implies more legroom."

"No knocking my house," I whispered to him.

Alice beamed. "You like it."

I shook my head.

"Love it?"

I nodded.

"I can't wait to tell Esme!"

"Why didn't she come?"

Alice's smile faded a little, twisted just off what it had been, like my question was hard to answer. "Oh, you know… they all remember how you are about presents. They didn't want to put you under too much pressure to like it."

"But of course I love it. How could I not?"

"They'll like that." She patted my arm. "Anyhoo, your closet is stocked. Use it wisely. And… I guess that's everything."

"Aren't you going to come inside?"

She strolled casually a few feet back. “Edward knows his way around. I’ll stop by…

later. Call me if you can’t match your clothes right.” She threw me a doubtful look and then smiled. “Jazz wants to hunt. See you.”

She shot off into the trees like the most graceful bullet.

“That was weird,” I said when the sound of her flight had vanished completely. “Am I really that bad? They didn’t have to stay away. Now I feel guilty. I didn’t even thank her right. We should go back, tell Esme—”

“Bella, don’t be silly. No one thinks you’re that unreasonable.”

“Then what—”

“Alone time is their other gift. Alice was trying to be subtle about it.”

“Oh.”

That was all it took to make the house disappear. We could have been anywhere. I didn’t see the trees or the stones or the stars. It was just Edward.

“Let me show you what they’ve done,” he said, pulling my hand. Was he oblivious to the fact that an electric current was pulsing through my body like adrenaline-spiked blood?

Once again I felt oddly off balance, waiting for reactions my body wasn’t capable of anymore. My heart should have been thundering like a steam

engine about to hit us. Deafening. My cheeks should have been brilliant red.

For that matter, I ought to have been exhausted. This had been the longest day of my life.

I laughed out loud—just one quiet little laugh of shock—when I realized that this day would never end.

“Do I get to hear the joke?”

“It’s not a very good one,” I told him as he led the way to the little rounded door. “I was just thinking—today is the first and last day of forever. It’s kind of hard to wrap my head around it. Even with all this extra room for wrapping.” I laughed again. He chuckled with me. He held his hand out toward the doorknob, waiting for me to do the honors. I stuck the key in the lock and turned it.

“You’re such a natural at this, Bella; I forget how very strange this all must be for you. I wish I could hear it.” He ducked down and yanked me up into his arms so fast that I didn’t see it coming—and that was really something.

“Hey!”

“Thresholds are part of my job description,” he reminded me. “But I’m curious. Tell me what you’re thinking about right now.”

He opened the door—it fell back with a barely audible creak—and stepped through into the little stone living room.

"Everything," I told him. "All at the same time, you know. Good things and things to worry about and things that are new. How I keep using too many superlatives in my head. Right now, I'm thinking that Esme is an artist. It's so perfect!"

The cottage room was something from a fairy tale. The floor was a crazy quilt of smooth, flat stones. The low ceiling had long exposed beams that someone as tall as Jacob would surely knock his head on. The walls were warm wood in some places, stone mosaics in others. The beehive fireplace in the corner held the remains of a slow flickering fire. It was driftwood burning there—the low flames were blue and green from the salt.

It was furnished in eclectic pieces, not one of them matching another, but harmonious just the same. One chair seemed vaguely medieval, while a low ottoman by the fire was more contemporary and the stocked bookshelf against the far window reminded me of movies set in Italy. Somehow each piece fit together with the others like a big threedimensional puzzle. There were a few paintings on the walls that I recognized—some of my very favorites from the big house. Priceless originals, no doubt, but they seemed to belong here, too, like all the rest.

It was a place where anyone could believe magic existed. A place where you just expected Snow White to walk right in with her apple in hand, or a unicorn to stop and nibble at the rosebushes.

Edward had always thought that he belonged to the world of horror stories. Of course, I'd known he was

dead wrong. It was obvious that he belonged here. In a fairy tale. And now I was in the story with him.

I was about to take advantage of the fact that he hadn't gotten around to setting me back on my feet and that his wits-scramblingly beautiful face was only inches away when he said, "We're lucky Esme thought to add an extra room. No one was planning for Ness—

Renesmee."

I frowned at him, my thoughts channeled down a less pleasant path.

"Not you, too," I complained.

"Sorry, love. I hear it in their thoughts all the time, you know. It's rubbing off on me."

I sighed. My baby, the sea serpent. Maybe there was no help for it. Well, I wasn't giving in.

"I'm sure you're dying to see the closet. Or, at least I'll tell Alice that you were, to make her feel good."

"Should I be afraid?"

"Terrified."

He carried me down a narrow stone hallway with tiny arches in the ceiling, like it was our own miniature castle.

"That will be Renesmee's room," he said, nodding to an empty room with a pale wooden floor. "They didn't have time to do much with it, what with the angry werewolves. . . ."

I laughed quietly, amazed at how quickly everything had turned right when it had all had looked so nightmarish just a week ago.

Drat Jacob for making everything perfect this way.

“Here’s our room. Esme tried to bring some of her island back here for us. She guessed that we would get attached.”

The bed was huge and white, with clouds of gossamer floating down from the canopy to the floor. The pale wood floor matched the other room, and now I grasped that it was precisely the color of a pristine beach. The walls were that almost-white-blue of a brilliant sunny day, and the back wall had big glass doors that opened into a little hidden garden. Climbing roses and a small round pond, smooth as a mirror and edged with shiny stones. A tiny, calm ocean for us.

“Oh” was all I could say.

“I know,” he whispered.

We stood there for a minute, remembering. Though the memories were human and clouded, they took over my mind completely.

He smiled a wide, gleaming smile and then laughed. “The closet is through those double doors. I should warn you—it’s bigger than this room.”

I didn’t even glance at the doors. There was nothing else in the world but him again—

his arms curled under me, his sweet breath on my face, his lips just inches from mine—

and there was nothing that could distract me now, newborn vampire or not.

“We’re going to tell Alice that I ran right to the clothes,” I whispered, twisting my fingers into his hair and pulling my face closer to his. “We’re going to tell her I spent hours in there playing dress-up. We’re going to lie.”

He caught up to my mood in an instant, or maybe he’d already been there, and he was just trying to let me fully appreciate my birthday present, like a gentleman. He pulled my face to his with a sudden fierceness, a low moan in his throat. The sound sent the electric current running through my body into a near-frenzy, like I couldn’t get close enough to him fast enough.

I heard the fabric tearing under our hands, and I was glad my clothes, at least, were already destroyed. It was too late for his. It felt almost rude to ignore the pretty white bed, but we just weren’t going to make it that far.

This second honeymoon wasn’t like our first.

Our time on the island had been the epitome of my human life. The very best of it. I’d been so ready to string along my human time, just to hold on to what I had with him for a little while longer. Because the physical part wasn’t going to be the same ever again. I should have guessed, after a day like today, that it would be better. I could really appreciate him now—

could properly see every beautiful line of his perfect face, of his long, flawless body with my strong new eyes, every angle and every plane of him. I could taste his pure, vivid scent on my tongue and feel the unbelievable silkiness of his marble skin under my sensitive fingertips.

My skin was so sensitive under his hands, too.

He was all new, a different person as our bodies tangled gracefully into one on the sandpale floor. No caution, no restraint. No fear—especially not that. We could love together—both active participants now. Finally equals.

Like our kisses before, every touch was more than I was used to. So much of himself he'd been holding back. Necessary at the time, but I couldn't believe how much I'd been missing.

I tried to keep in mind that I was stronger than he was, but it was hard to focus on anything with sensations so intense, pulling my attention to a million different places in my body every second; if I hurt him, he didn't complain.

A very, very small part of my head considered the interesting conundrum presented in this situation. I was never going to get tired, and neither was he. We didn't have to catch our breath or rest or eat or even use the bathroom; we had no more mundane human needs. He had the most beautiful, perfect body in the world and I had him all to myself, and it didn't feel like I was ever going to find a point where I would think, Now I've had enough for one day. I was always

going to want more. And the day was never going to end. So, in such a situation, how did we ever stop?

It didn't bother me at all that I had no answer.

I sort of noticed when the sky began to lighten. The tiny ocean outside turned from black to gray, and a lark started to sing somewhere very close by—maybe she had a nest in the roses.

"Do you miss it?" I asked him when her song was done.

It wasn't the first time we'd spoken, but we weren't exactly keeping up a conversation, either.

"Miss what?" he murmured.

"All of it—the warmth, the soft skin, the tasty smell… I'm not losing anything at all, and I just wondered if it was a little bit sad for you that you were."

He laughed, low and gentle. "It would be hard to find someone less sad than I am now. Impossible, I'd venture. Not many people get every single thing they want, plus all the things they didn't think to ask for, in the same day."

"Are you avoiding the question?"

He pressed his hand against my face. "You are warm," he told me. It was true, in a sense. To me, his hand was warm. It wasn't the same as touching Jacob's flame-hot skin, but it was more comfortable. More natural. Then he pulled his fingers very slowly down my face, lightly tracing from my jaw to my throat and

then all the way down to my waist. My eyes rolled back into my head a little.

"You are soft."

His fingers were like satin against my skin, so I could see what he meant.

"And as for the scent, well, I couldn't say I missed that. Do you remember the scent of those hikers on our hunt?"

"I've been trying very hard not to."

"Imagine kissing that."

My throat ripped into flames like pulling the cord on a hot-air balloon.

"Oh."

"Precisely. So the answer is no. I am purely full of joy, because I am missing nothing. No one has more than I do now."

I was about to inform him of the one exception to his statement, but my lips were suddenly very busy.

When the little pool turned pearl-colored with the sunrise, I thought of another question for him.

"How long does this go on? I mean, Carlisle and Esme, Em and Rose, Alice and Jasper

—they don't spend all day locked in their rooms. They're out in public, fully clothed, all the time. Does this... craving ever let up?" I twisted myself closer into

him—quite an accomplishment, actually—to make it clear what I was talking about.

"That's difficult to say. Everyone is different and, well, so far you're the very most different of all. The average young vampire is too obsessed with thirst to notice much else for a while. That doesn't seem to apply to you. With the average vampire, though, after that first year, other needs make themselves known. Neither thirst nor any other desire really ever fades. It's simply a matter of learning to balance them, learning to prioritize and manage. . . ."

"How long?"

He smiled, wrinkling his nose a little. "Rosalie and Emmett were the worst. It took a solid decade before I could stand to be within a five-mile radius of them. Even Carlisle and Esme had a difficult time stomaching it. They kicked the happy couple out eventually. Esme built them a house, too. It was grander than this one, but then, Esme knows what Rose likes, and she knows what you like."

"So, after ten years, then?" I was pretty sure that Rosalie and Emmett had nothing on us, but it might sound cocky if I went higher than a decade. "Everybody is normal again?

Like they are now?"

Edward smiled again. "Well, I'm not sure what you mean by normal. You've seen my family going about life in a fairly human way, but you've been sleeping nights." He winked at me. "There's a tremendous amount of time left over when you don't have to sleep.

It makes balancing your… interests quite easy. There's a reason why I'm the best musician in the family, why—besides Carlisle—I've read the most books, studied the most sciences, become fluent in the most languages…. Emmett would have you believe that I'm such a know-it-all because of the mind reading, but the truth is that I've just had a lot of free time."

We laughed together, and the motion of our laughter did interesting things to the way our bodies were connected, effectively ending that conversation.

# Chapter 25

## FAVOR

It was only a little while later that Edward reminded me of my priorities. It took him just one word.

“Renesmee . . .”

I sighed. She would be awake soon. It must be nearly seven in the morning. Would she be looking for me? Abruptly, something close to panic had my body freezing up. What would she look like today?

Edward felt the total distraction of my stress. “It’s all right, love. Get dressed, and we’ll be back to the house in two seconds.”

I probably looked like a cartoon, the way I sprung up, then looked back at him—his diamond body faintly glinting in the diffuse light—then away to the west, where Renesmee waited, then back at him again, then back toward her, my head whipping from side to side a half dozen times in a second. Edward smiled, but didn’t laugh; he was a strong man.

“It’s all about balance, love. You’re so good at all of this, I don’t imagine it will take too long to put everything in perspective.”

“And we have all night, right?”

He smiled wider. “Do you think I could bear to let you get dressed now if that weren’t the case?”

That would have to be enough to get me through the daylight hours. I would balance this overwhelming, devastating desire so that I could be a good— It was hard to think the word. Though Renesmee was very real and vital in my life, it was still difficult to think of myself as a mother. I supposed anyone would feel the same, though, without nine months to get used to the idea. And with a child that changed by the hour. The thought of Renesmee's speeding life had me stressed-out again in an instant. I didn't even pause at the ornately carved double doors to catch my breath before finding out what Alice had done. I just burst through, intent on wearing the first things I touched. I should have known it wouldn't be that easy.

"Which ones are mine?" I hissed. As promised, the room was bigger than our bedroom. It might have been bigger than the rest of the house put together, but I'd have to pace it off to be positive. I had a brief mental flash of Alice trying to persuade Esme to ignore classic proportions and allow this monstrosity. I wondered how Alice had won that one. Everything was wrapped in garment bags, pristine and white, row after row after row.

"To the best of my knowledge, everything but this rack here"—he touched a bar that stretched along the half-wall to the left of the door—"is yours."

"All of this?"

He shrugged.

"Alice," we said together. He said her name like an explanation; I said it like an expletive.

“Fine,” I muttered, and I pulled down the zipper on the closest bag. I growled under my breath when I saw the floorlength silk gown inside—baby pink.

Finding something normal to wear could take all day!

“Let me help,” Edward offered. He sniffed carefully at the air and then followed some scent to the back of the long room. There was a built-in dresser there. He sniffed again, then opened a drawer. With a triumphant grin, he held out a pair of artfully faded blue jeans.

I flitted to his side. “How did you do that?”

“Denim has its own scent just like anything else. Now… stretch cotton?”

He followed his nose to a half-rack, unearthing a long-sleeved white t-shirt. He tossed it to me.

“Thanks,” I said fervently. I inhaled each fabric, memorizing the scent for future searches through this madhouse. I remembered silk and satin; I would avoid those. It only took him seconds to find his own clothes—if I hadn’t seen him undressed, I would have sworn there was nothing more beautiful than Edward in his khakis and pale beige pullover—and then he took my hand. We darted through the hidden garden, leaped lightly over the stone wall, and hit the forest at a dead sprint. I pulled my hand free so that we could race back. He beat me this time.

Renesmee was awake; she was sitting up on the floor with Rose and Emmett hovering over her, playing with a little pile of twisted silverware. She had a

mangled spoon in her right hand. As soon as she spied me through the glass, she chucked the spoon on the floor—where it left a divot in the wood—and pointed in my direction imperiously. Her audience laughed; Alice, Jasper, Esme, and Carlisle were sitting on the couch, watching her as if she were the most engrossing film.

I was through the door before their laughter had barely begun, bounding across the room and scooping her up from the floor in the same second. We smiled widely at each other.

She was different, but not so much. A little longer again, her proportions drifting from babyish to childlike. Her hair was longer by a quarter inch, the curls bouncing like springs with every movement. I'd let my imagination run wild on the trip back, and I'd imagined worse than this. Thanks to my overdone fears, these little changes were almost a relief. Even without Carlisle's measurements, I was sure the changes were slower than yesterday.

Renesmee patted my cheek. I winced. She was hungry again.

"How long has she been up?" I asked as Edward disappeared through the kitchen doorway. I was sure he was on his way to get her breakfast, having seen what she'd just thought as clearly as I had. I wondered if he would ever have noticed her little quirk, if he'd been the only one to know her. To him, it probably would have seemed like hearing anyone.

"Just a few minutes," Rose said. "We would have called you soon. She's been asking for you—

demanding might be a better description. Esme sacrificed her second-best silver service to keep the little monster entertained." Rose smiled at Renesmee with so much gloating affection that the criticism was entirely weightless. "We didn't want to… er, bother you."

Rosalie bit her lip and looked away, trying not to laugh. I could feel Emmett's silent laughter behind me, sending vibrations through the foundations of the house. I kept my chin high. "We'll get your room set up right away," I said to Renesmee.

"You'll like the cottage. It's magic." I look up at Esme. "Thank you, Esme. So much. It's absolutely perfect."

Before Esme could respond, Emmett was laughing again—it wasn't silent this time.

"So it's still standing?" he managed to get out between his snickers. "I would've thought you two had knocked it to rubble by now. What were you doing last night?

Discussing the national debt?" He howled with laughter.

I gritted my teeth and reminded myself of the negative consequences when I'd let my temper get away from me yesterday. Of course, Emmett wasn't as breakable as Seth. . . . Thinking of Seth made me wonder. "Where're the wolves today?" I glanced out the window wall, but there had been no sign of Leah on the way in.

"Jacob took off this morning pretty early," Rosalie told me, a little frown creasing her forehead. "Seth followed him out."

"What was he so upset about?" Edward asked as he came back into the room with Renesmee's cup. There must have been more in Rosalie's memory than I'd seen in her expression.

Without breathing, I handed Renesmee off to Rosalie. Super-self-control, maybe, but there was no way I was going to be able to feed her. Not yet.

"I don't know—or care," Rosalie grumbled, but she answered Edward's question more fully. "He was watching Nessie sleep, his mouth hanging open like the moron he is, and then he just jumped to his feet without any kind of trigger—that I noticed, anyway—and stormed out. I was glad to be rid of him. The more time he spends here, the less chance there is that we'll ever get the smell out."

"Rose," Esme chided gently.

Rosalie flipped her hair. "I suppose it doesn't matter. We won't be here that much longer."

"I still say we should go straight to New Hampshire and get things set up," Emmett said, obviously continuing an earlier conversation. "Bella's already registered at Dartmouth. Doesn't look like it will take her all that long to be able to handle school."

He turned to look at me with a teasing grin. "I'm sure you'll ace your classes…

apparently there's nothing interesting for you to do at night besides study."

Rosalie giggled.

Do not lose your temper, do not lose your temper, I chanted to myself. And then I was proud of myself for keeping my head.

So I was pretty surprised that Edward didn't.

He growled—an abrupt, shocking rasp of sound—and the blackest fury rolled across his expression like storm clouds.

Before any of us could respond, Alice was on her feet.

"What is he doing? What is that dog doing that has erased my schedule for the entire day? I can't see anything! No!" She shot me a tortured glance. "Look at you! You need me to show you how to use your closet."

For one second I was grateful for whatever Jacob was up to.

And then Edward's hands balled up into fists and he snarled, "He talked to Charlie. He thinks Charlie is following after him. Coming here. Today."

Alice said a word that sounded very odd in her trilling, ladylike voice, and then she blurred into motion, streaking out the back door.

"He told Charlie?" I gasped. "But—doesn't he understand? How could he do that?"

Charlie couldn't know about me! About vampires! That would put him on a hit list that even the Cullens couldn't save him from. "No!"

Edward spoke through his teeth. "Jacob's on his way in now."

It must have started raining farther east. Jacob came through the door shaking his wet hair like a dog, flipping droplets on the carpet and the couch where they made little round gray spots on the white. His teeth glinted against his dark lips; his eyes were bright and excited. He walked with jerky movements, like he was all hyped-up about destroying my father's life.

"Hey, guys," he greeted us, grinning.

It was perfectly silent.

Leah and Seth slipped in behind him, in their human forms—for now; both of their hands were trembling with the tension in the room.

"Rose," I said, holding my arms out. Wordlessly, Rosalie handed me Renesmee. I pressed her close to my motionless heart, holding her like a talisman against rash behavior. I would keep her in my arms until I was sure my decision to kill Jacob was based entirely on rational judgment rather than fury.

She was very still, watching and listening. How much did she understand?

"Charlie'll be here soon," Jacob said to me casually. "Just a heads-up. I assume Alice is getting you sunglasses or something?"

“You assume way too much,” I spit through my teeth. “What. Have. You. Done? ”

Jacob’s smile wavered, but he was still too wound up to answer seriously. “Blondie and Emmett woke me up this morning going on and on about you all moving cross-country. Like I could let you leave. Charlie was the biggest issue there, right? Well, problem solved.”

“Do you even realize what you’ve done? The danger you’ve put him in?”

He snorted. “I didn’t put him in danger. Except from you. But you’ve got some kind of supernatural self-control, right? Not as good as mind reading, if you ask me. Much less exciting.”

Edward moved then, darting across the room to get in Jacob’s face. Though he was half a head shorter than Jacob, Jacob leaned away from his staggering anger as if Edward towered over him.

“That’s just a theory, mongrel,” he snarled. “You think we should test it out on Charlie?

Did you consider the physical pain you’re putting Bella through, even if she can resist?

Or the emotional pain if she doesn’t? I suppose what happens to Bella no longer concerns you!” He spit the last word.

Renesmee pressed her fingers anxiously to my cheek, anxiety coloring the replay in her head.

Edward's words finally cut through Jacob's strangely electric mood. His mouth dropped into a frown. "Bella will be in pain?"

"Like you've shoved a white-hot branding iron down her throat!"

I flinched, remembering the scent of pure human blood.

"I didn't know that," Jacob whispered.

"Then perhaps you should have asked first," Edward growled back through his teeth.

"You would have stopped me."

"You should have been stopped—"

"This isn't about me," I interrupted. I stood very still, keeping my hold on Renesmee and sanity. "This is about Charlie, Jacob. How could you put him in danger this way?

Do you realize it's death or vampire life for him now, too?" My voice trembled with the tears my eyes could no longer shed.

Jacob was still troubled by Edward's accusations, but mine didn't seem to bother him.

"Relax, Bella. I didn't tell him anything you weren't planning to tell him."

"But he's coming here!"

“Yeah, that’s the idea. Wasn’t the whole ‘let him make the wrong assumptions’ thing your plan? I think I provided a very nice red herring, if I do say so myself.”

My fingers flexed away from Renesmee. I curled them back in securely. “Say it straight, Jacob. I don’t have the patience for this.”

“I didn’t tell him anything about you, Bella. Not really. I told him about me. Well, show is probably a better verb.”

“He phased in front of Charlie,” Edward hissed.

I whispered, “You what?”

“He’s brave. Brave as you are. Didn’t pass out or throw up or anything. I gotta say, I was impressed. You should’ve seen his face when I started taking my clothes off, though. Priceless,” Jacob chortled.

“You absolute moron! You could have given him a heart attack!”

“Charlie’s fine. He’s tough. If you’d give this just a minute, you’ll see that I did you a favor here.”

“You have half of that, Jacob.” My voice was flat and steely. “You have thirty seconds to tell me every single word before I give Renesmee to Rosalie and rip your miserable head off. Seth won’t be able to stop me this time.”

“Jeez, Bells. You didn’t used to be so melodramatic. Is that a vampire thing?”

“Twenty-six seconds.”

Jacob rolled his eyes and flopped into the nearest chair. His little pack moved to stand on his flanks, not at all relaxed the way he seemed to be; Leah's eyes were on me, her teeth slightly bared.

"So I knocked on Charlie's door this morning and asked him to come for a walk with me. He was confused, but when I told him it was about you and that you were back in town, he followed me out to the woods. I told him you weren't sick anymore, and that things were a little weird, but good. He was about to take off to see you, but I told him I had to show him something first. And then I phased." Jacob shrugged. My teeth felt like a vise was pushing them together. "I want every word, you monster."

"Well, you said I only had thirty seconds—okay, okay." My expression must have convinced him that I wasn't in the mood for teasing. "Lemme see… I phased back and got dressed, and then after he started breathing again, I said something like, 'Charlie, you don't live in the world you thought you lived in. The good news is, nothing has changed—except that now you know. Life'll go on the same way it always has. You can go right back to pretending that you don't believe any of this.'

"It took him a minute to get his head together, and then he wanted to know what was really going on with you, with the whole rare-disease thing. I told him that you had been sick, but you were fine now—it was just that you'd had to change a little bit in the process of getting better. He wanted to know what I meant by 'change,' and I told him that you looked a lot more like Esme now than you looked like Renée."

Edward hissed while I stared in horror; this was headed in a dangerous direction.

“After a few minutes, he asked, real quietly, if you turned into an animal, too. And I said, ‘She wishes she was that cool!’” Jacob chuckled.

Rosalie made a noise of disgust.

“I started to tell him more about werewolves, but I didn’t even get the whole word out

—Charlie cut me off and said he’d ‘rather not know the specifics.’ Then he asked if you’d known what you were getting yourself into when you married Edward, and I said,

‘Sure, she’s known all about this for years, since she first came to Forks.’ He didn’t like that very much. I let him rant till he got it out of his system. After he got calmed down, he just wanted two things. He wanted to see you, and I said it would be better if he gave me a head start to explain.”

I inhaled deeply. “What was the other thing he wanted?”

Jacob smiled. “You’ll like this. His main request is that he be told as little as possible about all of this. If it’s not absolutely essential for him to know something, then keep it to yourself. Need to know, only.”

I felt relief for the first time since Jacob had walked in. “I can handle that part.”

"Other than that, he'd just like to pretend things are normal." Jacob's smile turned smug; he must suspect that I would be starting to feel the first faint stirrings of gratitude about now.

"What did you tell him about Renesmee?" I struggled to maintain the razor edge in my voice, fighting the reluctant appreciation. It was premature. There was still so much wrong with this situation. Even if Jacob's intervention had brought out a better reaction in Charlie than I'd ever hoped for…

"Oh yeah. So I told him that you and Edward had inherited a new little mouth to feed."

He glanced at Edward. "She's your orphaned ward—like Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson." Jacob snorted. "I didn't think you'd mind me lying. That's all part of the game, right?" Edward didn't respond in any way, so Jacob went on. "Charlie was way past being shocked at this point, but he did ask if you were adopting her. 'Like a daughter? Like I'm sort of a grandfather?' were his exact words. I told him yes.

'Congrats, Gramps,' and all of that. He even smiled a little."

The stinging returned to my eyes, but not out of fear or anguish this time. Charlie was smiling at the idea of being a grandpa? Charlie would meet Renesmee?

"But she's changing so fast," I whispered.

"I told him that she was more special than all of us put together," Jacob said in a soft voice. He stood and walked right up to me, waving Leah and Seth off

when they started to follow. Renesmee reached out to him, but I hugged her more tightly to me. "I told him, 'Trust me, you don't want to know about this. But if you can ignore all the strange parts, you're going to be amazed. She's the most wonderful person in the whole world.'

And then I told him that if he could deal with that, you all would stick around for a while and he would have a chance to get to know her. But that if it was too much for him, you would leave. He said as long as no one forced too much information on him, he'd deal."

Jacob stared at me with half a smile, waiting.

"I'm not going to say thank you," I told him. "You're still putting Charlie at a huge risk."

"I am sorry about it hurting you. I didn't know it was like that. Bella, things are different with us now, but you'll always be my best friend, and I'll always love you. But I'll love you the right way now. There's finally a balance. We both have people we can't live without."

He smiled his very most Jacob-y smile. "Still friends?"

Try as hard as I could to resist, I had to smile back. Just a tiny smile. He held out his hand: an offer.

I took a deep breath and shifted Renesmee's weight to one arm. I put my left hand in his

—he didn't even flinch at the feel of my cool skin. "If I don't kill Charlie tonight, I'll consider forgiving you for this."

“When you don’t kill Charlie tonight, you’ll owe me huge.”

I rolled my eyes.

He held out his other hand toward Renesmee, a request this time. “Can I?”

“I’m actually holding her so that my hands aren’t free to kill you, Jacob. Maybe later.”

He sighed but didn’t push me on it. Wise of him.

Alice raced back through the door then, her hands full and her expression promising violence.

“You, you, and you,” she snapped, glaring at the werewolves. “If you must stay, get over in the corner and commit to being there for a while. I need to see. Bella, you’d better give him the baby, too. You’ll need your arms free, anyway.”

Jacob grinned in triumph.

Undiluted fear ripped through my stomach as the enormity of what I was about to do hit me. I was going to gamble on my iffy self-control with my pure human father as the guinea pig. Edward’s earlier words crashed in my ears again.

Did you consider the physical pain you’re putting Bella through, even if she can resist?

Or the emotional pain if she doesn’t?

I couldn’t imagine the pain of failure. My breathing turned to gasps.

“Take her,” I whispered, sliding Renesmee into Jacob’s arms.

He nodded, concern wrinkling his forehead. He gestured to the others, and they all went to the far corner of the room. Seth and Jake slouched on the floor at once, but Leah shook her head and pursed her lips.

“Am I allowed to leave?” she griped. She looked uncomfortable in her human body, wearing the same dirty t-shirt and cotton shorts she’d worn to shriek at me the other day, her short hair sticking up in irregular tufts. Her hands were still shaking.

“Of course,” Jake said.

“Stay east so you don’t cross Charlie’s path,” Alice added.

Leah didn’t look at Alice; she ducked out the back door and stomped into the bushes to phase.

Edward was back at my side, stroking my face. “You can do this. I know you can. I’ll help you; we all will.”

I met Edward’s eyes with panic screaming from my face. Was he strong enough to stop me if I made a wrong move?

“If I didn’t believe you could handle it, we’d disappear today. This very minute. But you can. And you’ll be happier if you can have Charlie in your life.”

I tried to slow my breathing.

Alice held out her hand. There was a small white box on her palm. “These will irritate your eyes—they won’t hurt, but they’ll cloud your vision. It’s annoying. They also won’t match your old color, but it’s still better than bright red, right?”

She flipped the contact box into the air and I caught it.

“When did you—”

“Before you left on the honeymoon. I was prepared for several possible futures.”

I nodded and opened the container. I’d never worn contacts before, but it couldn’t be that hard. I took the little brown quarter-sphere and pressed it, concave side in, to my eye.

I blinked, and a film interrupted my sight. I could see through it, of course, but I could also see the texture of the thin screen. My eye kept focusing on the microscopic scratches and warped sections.

“I see what you mean,” I murmured as I stuck the other one in. I tried to not blink this time. My eye automatically wanted to dislodge the obstruction.

“How do I look?”

Edward smiled. “Gorgeous. Of course—”

“Yes, yes, she always looks gorgeous,” Alice finished his thought impatiently. “It’s better than red, but that’s the highest commendation I can give. Muddy brown. Your brown was much prettier. Keep in mind that those won’t last forever—the venom in your eyes

will dissolve them in a few hours. So if Charlie stays longer than that, you'll have to excuse yourself to replace them. Which is a good idea anyway, because humans need bathroom breaks." She shook her head. "Esme, give her a few pointers on acting human while I stock the powder room with contacts."

"How long do I have?"

"Charlie will be here in five minutes. Keep it simple."

Esme nodded once and came to take my hand. "The main thing is not to sit too still or move too fast," she told me.

"Sit down if he does," Emmett interjected. "Humans don't like to just stand there."

"Let your eyes wander every thirty seconds or so," Jasper added. "Humans don't stare at one thing for too long."

"Cross your legs for about five minutes, then switch to crossing your ankles for the next five," Rosalie said.

I nodded once at each suggestion. I'd noticed them doing some of these things yesterday. I thought I could mimic their actions.

"And blink at least three times a minute," Emmett said. He frowned, then darted to where the television remote sat on the end table. He flipped the TV on to a college football game and nodded to himself.

"Move your hands, too. Brush your hair back or pretend to scratch something," Jasper said.

"I said Esme," Alice complained as she returned. "You'll overwhelm her."

"No, I think I got it all," I said. "Sit, look around, blink, fidget."

"Right," Esme approved. She hugged my shoulders.

Jasper frowned. "You'll be holding your breath as much as possible, but you need to move your shoulders a little to make it look like you're breathing."

I inhaled once and then nodded again.

Edward hugged me on my free side. "You can do this," he repeated, murmuring the encouragement in my ear.

"Two minutes," Alice said. "Maybe you should start out already on the couch. You've been sick, after all. That way he won't have to see you move right at first."

Alice pulled me to the sofa. I tried to move slowly, to make my limbs more clumsy. She rolled her eyes, so I must not have been doing a good job.

"Jacob, I need Renesmee," I said.

Jacob frowned, unmoving.

Alice shook her head. "Bella, that doesn't help me see."

"But I need her. She keeps me calm." The edge of panic in my voice was unmistakable.

"Fine," Alice groaned. "Hold her as still as you can and I'll try to see around her." She sighed wearily, like she'd been asked to work overtime on a holiday. Jacob sighed, too, but brought Renesmee to me, and then retreated quickly from Alice's glare. Edward took a seat beside me and put his arms around Renesmee and me. He leaned forward and looked Renesmee very seriously in the eyes.

"Renesmee, someone special is coming to see you and your mother," he said in a solemn voice, as if he expected her to understand every word. Did she? She looked back at him with clear, grave eyes. "But he's not like us, or even like Jacob. We have to be very careful with him. You shouldn't tell him things the way you tell us."

Renesmee touched his face.

"Exactly," he said. "And he's going to make you thirsty. But you mustn't bite him. He won't heal like Jacob."

"Can she understand you?" I whispered.

"She understands. You'll be careful, won't you, Renesmee? You'll help us?"

Renesmee touched him again.

"No, I don't care if you bite Jacob. That's fine."

Jacob chuckled.

"Maybe you should leave, Jacob," Edward said coldly, glaring in his direction. Edward hadn't forgiven Jacob, because he knew that no matter what

happened now, I was going to be hurting. But I'd take the burn happily if that were the worst thing I'd face tonight.

"I told Charlie I'd be here," Jacob said. "He needs the moral support."

"Moral support," Edward scoffed. "As far as Charlie knows, you're the most repulsive monster of us all."

"Repulsive?" Jake protested, and then he laughed quietly to himself. I heard the tires turn off the highway onto the quiet, damp earth of the Cullens' drive, and my breathing spiked again. My heart ought to have been hammering. It made me anxious that my body didn't have the right reactions.

I concentrated on the steady thrumming of Renesmee's heart to calm myself. It worked pretty quickly.

"Well done, Bella," Jasper whispered in approval.

Edward tightened his arm over my shoulders.

"You're sure?" I asked him.

"Positive. You can do anything. " He smiled and kissed me. It wasn't precisely a peck on the lips, and my wild vampiric reactions took me off guard yet again. Edward's lips were like a shot of some addictive chemical straight into my nervous system. I was instantly craving more. It took all my concentration to remember the baby in my arms.

Jasper felt my mood change. "Er, Edward, you might not want to distract her like that right now. She needs to be able to focus."

Edward pulled away. "Oops," he said.

I laughed. That had been my line from the very beginning, from the very first kiss.

"Later," I said, and anticipation curled my stomach into a ball.

"Focus, Bella," Jasper urged.

"Right." I pushed the trembly feelings away. Charlie, that was the main thing now. Keep Charlie safe today. We would have all night. . . .

"Bella."

"Sorry, Jasper."

Emmett laughed.

The sound of Charlie's cruiser got closer and closer. The second of levity passed, and everyone was still. I crossed my legs and practiced my blinks.

The car pulled in front of the house and idled for a few seconds. I wondered if Charlie was as nervous as I was. Then the engine cut off, and a door slammed. Three steps across the grass, and then eight echoing thuds against the wooden stairs. Four more echoing footsteps across the porch. Then silence. Charlie took two deep breaths. Knock, knock, knock.

I inhaled for what might be the last time. Renesmee nestled deeper into my arms, hiding her face in my hair.

Carlisle answered the door. His stressed expression changed to one of welcome, like switching the channel on the TV.

“Hello, Charlie,” he said, looking appropriately abashed. After all, we were supposed to be in Atlanta at the Center for Disease Control. Charlie knew he’d been lied to.

“Carlisle,” Charlie greeted him stiffly. “Where’s Bella?”

“Right here, Dad.”

Ugh! My voice was so wrong. Plus, I’d used up some of my air supply. I gulped in a quick refill, glad that Charlie’s scent had not saturated the room yet. Charlie’s blank expression told me how off my voice was. His eyes zeroed in on me and widened.

I read the emotions as they scrolled across his face.

Shock. Disbelief. Pain. Loss. Fear. Anger. Suspicion. More pain. I bit my lip. It felt funny. My new teeth were sharper against my granite skin than my human teeth had been against my soft human lips.

“Is that you, Bella?” he whispered.

“Yep.” I winced at my wind-chime voice. “Hi, Dad.”

He took a deep breath to steady himself.

“Hey, Charlie,” Jacob greeted him from the corner. “How’re things?”

Charlie glowered at Jacob once, shuddered at a memory, and then stared at me again. Slowly, Charlie walked across the room until he was a few feet away from me. He darted an accusing glare at Edward, and then his eyes flickered back to me. The warmth of his body heat beat against me with each pulse of his heart.

“Bella?” he asked again.

I spoke in a lower voice, trying to keep the ring out of it. “It’s really me.”

His jaw locked.

“I’m sorry, Dad,” I said.

“Are you okay?” he demanded.

“Really and truly great,” I promised. “Healthy as a horse.”

That was it for my oxygen.

“Jake told me this was… necessary. That you were dying.” He said the words like he didn’t believe them one bit.

I steeled myself, focused on Renesmee’s warm weight, leaned into Edward for support, and took a deep breath.

Charlie’s scent was a fistful of flames, punching straight down my throat. But it was so much more than pain. It was a hot stabbing of desire, too. Charlie smelled more delicious than anything I’d ever imagined. As appealing as the anonymous hikers had

been on the hunt, Charlie was doubly tempting. And he was just a few feet away, leaking mouthwatering heat and moisture into the dry air.

But I wasn't hunting now. And this was my father.

Edward squeezed my shoulders sympathetically, and Jacob shot an apologetic glance at me across the room.

I tried to collect myself and ignore the pain and longing of the thirst. Charlie was waiting for my answer.

"Jacob was telling you the truth."

"That makes one of you," Charlie growled.

I hoped Charlie could see past the changes in my new face to read the remorse there. Under my hair, Renesmee sniffed as Charlie's scent registered with her, too. I tightened my grip on her.

Charlie saw my anxious glance down and followed it. "Oh," he said, and all the anger fell off his face, leaving only shock behind. "This is her. The orphan Jacob said you're adopting."

"My niece," Edward lied smoothly. He must have decided that the resemblance between Renesmee and him was too pronounced to be ignored. Best to claim they were related from the beginning.

"I thought you'd lost your family," Charlie said, accusation returning to his voice.

“I lost my parents. My older brother was adopted, like me. I never saw him after that. But the courts located me when he and his wife died in a car accident, leaving their only child without any other family.”

Edward was so good at this. His voice was even, with just the right amount of innocence. I needed practice so that I could do that.

Renesmee peeked out from under my hair, sniffing again. She glanced shyly at Charlie from under her long lashes, then hid again.

“She’s... she’s, well, she’s a beauty.”

“Yes,” Edward agreed.

“Kind of a big responsibility, though. You two are just getting started.”

“What else could we do?” Edward brushed his fingers lightly over her cheek. I saw him touch her lips for just a moment—a reminder. “Would you have refused her?”

“Hmph. Well.” He shook his head absently. “Jake says you call her Nessie?”

“No, we don’t,” I said, my voice too sharp and piercing. “Her name is Renesmee.”

Charlie refocused on me. “How do you feel about this? Maybe Carlisle and Esme could

—”

“She’s mine,” I interrupted. “I want her.”

Charlie frowned. “You gonna make me a grandpa so young?”

Edward smiled. “Carlisle is a grandfather, too.”

Charlie shot an incredulous glance at Carlisle, still standing by the front door; he looked like Zeus’s younger, better-looking brother.

Charlie snorted and then laughed. “I guess that does sort of make me feel better.” His eyes strayed back to Renesmee. “She sure is something to look at.” His warm breath blew lightly across the space between us.

Renesmee leaned toward the smell, shaking off my hair and looking him full in the face for the first time. Charlie gasped.

I knew what he was seeing. My eyes—his eyes—copied exactly into her perfect face. Charlie started hyperventilating. His lips trembled, and I could read the numbers he mouthed. He was counting backward, trying to fit nine months into one. Trying to put it together but not able to force the evidence right in front of him to make any sense. Jacob got up and came over to pat Charlie on the back. He leaned in to whisper something in Charlie’s ear; only Charlie didn’t know we could all hear.

“Need to know, Charlie. It’s okay. I promise.”

Charlie swallowed and nodded. And then his eyes blazed as he took a step closer to Edward with his fists tightly clenched.

"I don't want to know everything, but I'm done with the lies!"

"I'm sorry," Edward said calmly, "but you need to know the public story more than you need to know the truth. If you're going to be part of this secret, the public story is the one that counts. It's to protect Bella and Renesmee as well as the rest of us. Can you go along with the lies for them?"

The room was full of statues. I crossed my ankles.

Charlie huffed once and then turned his glare on me. "You might've given me some warning, kid."

"Would it really have made this any easier?"

He frowned, and then he knelt on the floor in front of me. I could see the movement of the blood in his neck under his skin. I could feel the warm vibration of it. So could Renesmee. She smiled and reached one pink palm out to him. I held her back. She pushed her other hand against my neck, thirst, curiosity, and Charlie's face in her thoughts. There was a subtle edge to the message that made me think that she'd understood Edward's words perfectly; she acknowledged thirst, but overrode it in the same thought.

"Whoa," Charlie gasped, his eyes on her perfect teeth. "How old is she?"

"Um . . ."

"Three months," Edward said, and then added slowly, "rather, she's the size of a threemonth-old, more or

less. She's younger in some ways, more mature in others."

Very deliberately, Renesmee waved at him.

Charlie blinked spastically.

Jacob elbowed him. "Told you she was special, didn't I?"

Charlie cringed away from the contact.

"Oh, c'mon, Charlie," Jacob groaned. "I'm the same person I've always been. Just pretend this afternoon didn't happen."

The reminder made Charlie's lips go white, but he nodded once. "Just what is your part in all this, Jake?" he asked. "How much does Billy know? Why are you here?" He looked at Jacob's face, which was glowing as he stared at Renesmee.

"Well, I could tell you all about it—Billy knows absolutely everything—but it involves a lot of stuff about werewo—"

"Ungh!" Charlie protested, covering his ears. "Never mind."

Jacob grinned. "Everything's going to be great, Charlie. Just try to not believe anything you see."

My dad mumbled something unintelligible.

"Woo!" Emmett suddenly boomed in his deep bass. "Go Gators!"

Jacob and Charlie jumped. The rest of us froze.

Charlie recovered, then looked at Emmett over his shoulder. “Florida winning?”

“Just scored the first touchdown,” Emmett confirmed. He shot a look in my direction, wagging his eyebrows like a villain in vaudeville. “’Bout time somebody scored around here.”

I fought back a hiss. In front of Charlie? That was over the line. But Charlie was beyond noticing innuendos. He took yet another deep breath, sucking the air in like he was trying to pull it down to his toes. I envied him. He lurched to his feet, stepped around Jacob, and half-fell into an open chair. “Well,” he sighed, “I guess we should see if they can hold on to the lead.”

# Chapter 26

## SHINY

"I don't know how much we should tell Renée about this," Charlie said, hesitating with one foot out the door. He stretched, and then his stomach growled. I nodded. "I know. I don't want to freak her out. Better to protect her. This stuff isn't for the fainthearted."

His lips twisted up to the side ruefully. "I would have tried to protect you, too, if I'd known how. But I guess you've never fit into the fainthearted category, have you?"

I smiled back, pulling a blazing breath in through my teeth.

Charlie patted his stomach absently. "I'll think of something. We've got time to discuss this, right?"

"Right," I promised him.

It had been a long day in some ways, and so short in others. Charlie was late for dinner

—Sue Clearwater was cooking for him and Billy. That was going to be an awkward evening, but at least he'd be eating real food; I was glad someone was trying to keep him from starving due to his lack of cooking ability.

All day the tension had made the minutes pass slowly; Charlie had never relaxed the stiff set of his shoulders. But he'd been in no hurry to leave, either. He'd watched two whole games—thankfully so

absorbed in his thoughts that he was totally oblivious to Emmett's suggestive jokes that got more pointed and less football-related with each aside—and the after-game commentaries, and then the news, not moving until Seth had reminded him of the time.

"You gonna stand Billy and my mom up, Charlie? C'mon. Bella and Nessie'll be here tomorrow. Let's get some grub, eh?"

It had been clear in Charlie's eyes that he hadn't trusted Seth's assessment, but he'd let Seth lead the way out. The doubt was still there as he paused now. The clouds were thinning, the rain gone. The sun might even make an appearance just in time to set.

"Jake says you guys were going to take off on me," he muttered to me now.

"I didn't want to do that if there was any way at all around it. That's why we're still here."

"He said you could stay for a while, but only if I'm tough enough, and if I can keep my mouth shut."

"Yes… but I can't promise that we'll never leave, Dad. It's pretty complicated. . . ."

"Need to know," he reminded me.

"Right."

"You'll visit, though, if you have to go?"

"I promise, Dad. Now that you know just enough, I think this can work. I'll keep as close as you want."

He chewed on his lip for half a second, then leaned slowly toward me with his arms cautiously extended. I shifted Renesmee—napping now—to my left arm, locked my teeth, held my breath, and wrapped my right arm very lightly around his warm, soft waist.

“Keep real close, Bells,” he mumbled. “Real close.”

“Love you, Dad,” I whispered through my teeth.

He shivered and pulled away. I dropped my arm.

“Love you, too, kid. Whatever else has changed, that hasn’t.” He touched one finger to Renesmee’s pink cheek. “She sure looks a lot like you.”

I kept my expression casual, though I felt anything but. “More like Edward, I think.” I hesitated, and then added, “She has your curls.”

Charlie started, then snorted. “Huh. Guess she does. Huh. Grandpa.” He shook his head doubtfully. “Do I ever get to hold her?”

I blinked in shock and then composed myself. After considering for a half second and judging Renesmee’s appearance—she looked completely out—I decided that I might as well push my luck to the limit, since things were going so well today. . . .

“Here,” I said, holding her out to him. He automatically made an awkward cradle with his arms, and I tucked Renesmee into it. His skin wasn’t quite as hot as hers, but it made my throat tickle to feel the warmth flowing under the thin membrane. Where my white skin brushed him it left goose bumps. I wasn’t

sure if this was a reaction to my new temperature or totally psychological.

Charlie grunted quietly as he felt her weight. “She’s... sturdy.”

I frowned. She felt feather-light to me. Maybe my measure was off.

“Sturdy is good,” Charlie said, seeing my expression. Then he muttered to himself,

“She’ll need to be tough, surrounded by all this craziness.” He bounced his arms gently, swaying a little from side to side. “Prettiest baby I ever saw, including you, kid. Sorry, but it’s true.”

“I know it is.”

“Pretty baby,” he said again, but it was closer to a coo this time. I could see it in his face—I could watch it growing there. Charlie was just as helpless against her magic as the rest of us. Two seconds in his arms, and already she owned him.

“Can I come back tomorrow?”

“Sure, Dad. Of course. We’ll be here.”

“You’d better be,” he said sternly, but his face was soft, still gazing at Renesmee. “See you tomorrow, Nessie.”

“Not you, too!”

“Huh?”

"Her name is Renesmee. Like Renée and Esme, put together. No variations." I struggled to calm myself without the deep breath this time. "Do you want to hear her middle name?"

"Sure."

"Carlie. With a C. Like Carlisle and Charlie put together."

Charlie's eye-creasing grin lit up his face, taking me off guard. "Thanks, Bells."

"Thank you, Dad. So much has changed so quickly. My head hasn't stopped spinning. If I didn't have you now, I don't know how I'd keep my grip on—on reality." I'd been about to say my grip on who I was. That was probably more than he needed. Charlie's stomach growled.

"Go eat, Dad. We will be here." I remembered how it felt, that first uncomfortable immersion in fantasy—the sensation that everything would disappear in the light of the rising sun.

Charlie nodded and then reluctantly returned Renesmee to me. He glanced past me into the house; his eyes were a little wild for a minute as he stared around the big bright room. Everyone was still there, besides Jacob, who I could hear raiding the refrigerator in the kitchen; Alice was lounging on the bottom step of the staircase with Jasper's head in her lap; Carlisle had his head bent over a fat book in his lap; Esme was humming to herself, sketching on a notepad, while Rosalie and Emmett laid out the foundation for a monumental house of cards under

the stairs; Edward had drifted to his piano and was playing very softly to himself. There was no evidence that the day was coming to a close, that it might be time to eat or shift activities in preparation for evening. Something intangible had changed in the atmosphere. The Cullens weren't trying as hard as they usually did—the human charade had slipped ever so slightly, enough for Charlie to feel the difference.

He shuddered, shook his head, and sighed. "See you tomorrow, Bella." He frowned and then added, "I mean, it's not like you don't look… good. I'll get used to it."

"Thanks, Dad."

Charlie nodded and walked thoughtfully toward his car. I watched him drive away; it wasn't until I heard his tires hit the freeway that I realized I'd done it. I'd actually made it through the whole day without hurting Charlie. All by myself. I must have a superpower!

It seemed too good to be true. Could I really have both my new family and some of my old as well? And I'd thought that yesterday had been perfect.

"Wow," I whispered. I blinked and felt the third set of contact lenses disintegrate. The sound of the piano cut off, and Edward's arms were around my waist, his chin resting on my shoulder.

"You took the word right out of my mouth."

"Edward, I did it!"

"You did. You were unbelievable. All that worrying over being a newborn, and then you skip it altogether." He laughed quietly.

"I'm not even sure she's really a vampire, let alone a newborn," Emmett called from under the stairs. "She's too tame."

All the embarrassing comments he'd made in front of my father sounded in my ears again, and it was probably a good thing I was holding Renesmee. Unable to help my reaction entirely, I snarled under my breath.

"Oooo, scary," Emmett laughed.

I hissed, and Renesmee stirred in my arms. She blinked a few times, then looked around, her expression confused. She sniffed, then reached for my face.

"Charlie will be back tomorrow," I assured her.

"Excellent," Emmett said. Rosalie laughed with him this time.

"Not brilliant, Emmett," Edward said scornfully, holding out his hands to take Renesmee from me. He winked when I hesitated, and so, a little confused, I gave her to him.

"What do you mean?" Emmett demanded.

"It's a little dense, don't you think, to antagonize the strongest vampire in the house?"

Emmett threw his head back and snorted. "Please!"

"Bella," Edward murmured to me while Emmett listened closely, "do you remember a few months ago, I asked you to do me a favor once you were immortal?"

That rang a dim bell. I sifted through the blurry human conversations. After a moment, I remembered and I gasped, "Oh!"

Alice trilled a long, pealing laugh. Jacob poked his head around the corner, his mouth stuffed with food.

"What?" Emmett growled.

"Really?" I asked Edward.

"Trust me," he said.

I took a deep breath. "Emmett, how do you feel about a little bet?"

He was on his feet at once. "Awesome. Bring it."

I bit my lip for a second. He was just so huge.

"Unless you're too afraid… ?" Emmett suggested.

I squared my shoulders. "You. Me. Arm-wrestling. Dining room table. Now."

Emmett's grin stretched across his face.

"Er, Bella," Alice said quickly, "I think Esme is fairly fond of that table. It's an antique."

"Thanks," Esme mouthed at her.

"No problem," Emmett said with a gleaming smile. "Right this way, Bella."

I followed him out the back, toward the garage; I could hear all the others trailing behind. There was a largish granite boulder standing up out of a tumble of rocks near the river, obviously Emmett's goal. Though the big rock was a little rounded and irregular, it would do the job.

Emmett placed his elbow on the rock and waved me forward.

I was nervous again as I watched the thick muscles in Emmett's arm roll, but I kept my face smooth. Edward had promised I would be stronger than anyone for a while. He seemed very confident about this, and I felt strong. That strong? I wondered, looking at Emmett's biceps. I wasn't even two days old, though, and that ought to count for something. Unless nothing was normal about me. Maybe I wasn't as strong as a normal newborn. Maybe that's why control was so easy for me.

I tried to look unconcerned as I set my elbow against the stone.

"Okay, Emmett. I win, and you cannot say one more word about my sex life to anyone, not even Rose. No allusions, no innuendos—no nothing."

His eyes narrowed. "Deal. I win, and it's going to get a lot worse."

He heard my breath stop and grinned evilly. There was no hint of bluff in his eyes.

"You gonna back down so easy, little sister?" Emmett taunted. "Not much wild about you, is there? I bet

that cottage doesn't have a scratch." He laughed. "Did Edward tell you how many houses Rose and I smashed?"

I gritted my teeth and grabbed his big hand. "One, two—"

"Three," he grunted, and shoved against my hand.

Nothing happened.

Oh, I could feel the force he was exerting. My new mind seemed pretty good at all kinds of calculations, and so I could tell that if he wasn't meeting any resistance, his hand would have pounded right through the rock without difficulty. The pressure increased, and I wondered randomly if a cement truck doing forty miles an hour down a sharp decline would have similar power. Fifty miles an hour? Sixty? Probably more. It wasn't enough to move me. His hand shoved against mine with crushing force, but it wasn't unpleasant. It felt kind of good in a weird way. I'd been so very careful since the last time I woke up, trying so hard not to break things. It was a strange relief to use my muscles. To let the strength flow rather than struggling to restrain it. Emmett grunted; his forehead creased and his whole body strained in one rigid line toward the obstacle of my unmoving hand. I let him sweat—figuratively—for a moment while I enjoyed the sensation of the crazy force running through my arm. A few seconds, though, and I was a little bored with it. I flexed; Emmett lost an inch. I laughed. Emmett snarled harshly through his teeth.

“Just keep your mouth shut,” I reminded him, and then I smashed his hand into the boulder. A deafening crack echoed off the trees. The rock shuddered, and a piece—

about an eighth of the mass—broke off at an invisible fault line and crashed to the ground. It fell on Emmett’s foot, and I snickered. I could hear Jacob’s and Edward’s muffled laughter.

Emmett kicked the rock fragment across the river. It sliced a young maple in half before thudding into the base of a big fir, which swayed and then fell into another tree.

“Rematch. Tomorrow.”

“It’s not going to wear off that fast,” I told him. “Maybe you ought to give it a month.”

Emmett growled, flashing his teeth. “Tomorrow.”

“Hey, whatever makes you happy, big brother.”

As he turned to stalk away, Emmett punched the granite, shattering off an avalanche of shards and powder. It was kind of neat, in a childish way.

Fascinated by the undeniable proof that I was stronger than the strongest vampire I’d ever known, I placed my hand, fingers spread wide, against the rock. Then I dug my fingers slowly into the stone, crushing rather than digging; the consistency reminded me of hard cheese. I ended up with a handful of gravel.

“Cool,” I mumbled.

With a grin stretching my face, I whirled in a sudden circle and karate-chopped the rock with the side of my hand. The stone shrieked and groaned and—with a big poof of dust

—split in two.

I started giggling.

I didn't pay much attention to the chuckles behind me while I punched and kicked the rest of the boulder into fragments. I was having too much fun, snickering away the whole time. It wasn't until I heard a new little giggle, a high-pitched peal of bells, that I turned away from my silly game.

"Did she just laugh?"

Everyone was staring at Renesmee with the same dumbstruck expression that must have been on my face.

"Yes," Edward said.

"Who wasn't laughing?" Jake muttered, rolling his eyes.

"Tell me you didn't let go a bit on your first run, dog," Edward teased, no antagonism in his voice at all.

"That's different," Jacob said, and I watched in surprise as he mock-punched Edward's shoulder. "Bella's supposed to be a grown-up. Married and a mom and all that. Shouldn't there be more dignity?"

Renesmee frowned, and touched Edward's face.

"What does she want?" I asked.

“Less dignity,” Edward said with a grin. “She was having almost as much fun watching you enjoy yourself as I was.”

“Am I funny?” I asked Renesmee, darting back and reaching for her at the same time that she reached for me. I took her out of Edward’s arms and offered her the shard of rock in my hand. “You want to try?”

She smiled her glittering smile and took the stone in both hands. She squeezed, a little dent forming between her eyebrows as she concentrated.

There was a tiny grinding sound, and a bit of dust. She frowned, and held the chunk up to me.

“I’ll get it,” I said, pinching the stone into sand.

She clapped and laughed; the delicious sound of it made us all join in. The sun suddenly burst through the clouds, shooting long beams of ruby and gold across the ten of us, and I was immediately lost in the beauty of my skin in the light of the sunset. Dazed by it.

Renesmee stroked the smooth diamond-bright facets, then laid her arm next to mine. Her skin had just a faint luminosity, subtle and mysterious. Nothing that would keep her inside on a sunny day like my glowing sparkle. She touched my face, thinking of the difference and feeling disgruntled.

“You’re the prettiest,” I assured her.

“I’m not sure I can agree to that,” Edward said, and when I turned to answer him, the sunlight on his face stunned me into silence.

Jacob had his hand in front of his face, pretending to shield his eyes from the glare.

“Freaky Bella,” he commented.

“What an amazing creature she is,” Edward murmured, almost in agreement, as if Jacob’s comment was meant as a compliment. He was both dazzling and dazzled. It was a strange feeling—not surprising, I supposed, since everything felt strange now—

this being a natural at something. As a human, I’d never been best at anything. I was okay at dealing with Renée, but probably lots of people could have done better; Phil seemed to be holding his own. I was a good student, but never the top of the class. Obviously, I could be counted out of anything athletic. Not artistic or musical, no particular talents to brag of. Nobody ever gave away a trophy for reading books. After eighteen years of mediocrity, I was pretty used to being average. I realized now that I’d long ago given up any aspirations of shining at anything. I just did the best with what I had, never quite fitting into my world.

So this was really different. I was amazing now—to them and to myself. It was like I had been born to be a vampire. The idea made me want to laugh, but it also made me want to sing. I had found my true place in the world, the place I fit, the place I shined.

# Chapter 27

## TRAVEL PLANS

I took mythology a lot more seriously since I'd become a vampire. Often, when I looked back over my first three months as an immortal, I imagined how the thread of my life might look in the Fates' loom—who knew but that it actually existed? I was sure my thread must have changed color; I thought it had probably started out as a nice beige, something supportive and non-confrontational, something that would look good in the background. Now it felt like it must be bright crimson, or maybe glistening gold.

The tapestry of family and friends that wove together around me was a beautiful, glowing thing, full of their bright, complementary colors.

I was surprised by some of the threads I got to include in my life. The werewolves, with their deep, woodsy colors, were not something I'd expected; Jacob, of course, and Seth, too. But my old friends Quil and Embry became part of the fabric as they joined Jacob's pack, and even Sam and Emily were cordial. The tensions between our families eased, mostly due to Renesmee. She was easy to love.

Sue and Leah Clearwater were interlaced into our life, too—two more I had not anticipated.

Sue seemed to have taken it on herself to smooth Charlie's transition into the world of make-believe. She came with him to the Cullens' most days, though she never seemed truly comfortable here the way her

son and most of Jake's pack did. She did not speak often; she just hovered protectively near Charlie. She was always the first person he looked to when Renesmee did something disturbingly advanced—which was often. In answer, Sue would eye Seth meaningfully as if to say, Yeah, tell me about it. Leah was even less comfortable than Sue and was the only part of our recently extended family who was openly hostile to the merger. However, she and Jacob had a new camaraderie that kept her close to us all. I asked him about it once—hesitantly; I didn't want to pry, but the relationship was so different from the way it used to be that it made me curious. He shrugged and told me it was a pack thing. She was his second-incommand now, his "beta," as I'd called it once long ago.

"I figured as long as I was going to do this Alpha thing for real," Jacob explained, "I'd better nail down the formalities."

The new responsibility made Leah feel the need to check in with him often, and since he was always with Renesmee…

Leah was not happy to be near us, but she was the exception. Happiness was the main component in my life now, the dominant pattern in the tapestry. So much so that my relationship with Jasper was now much closer than I'd ever dreamed it would be. At first I was really annoyed, though.

"Yeesh!" I complained to Edward one night after we'd put Renesmee in her wroughtiron crib. "If I haven't killed Charlie or Sue yet, it's probably not going to

happen. I wish Jasper would stop hovering all the time!”

“No one doubts you, Bella, not in the slightest,” he assured me. “You know how Jasper is—he can’t resist a good emotional climate. You’re so happy all the time, love, he gravitates toward you without thinking.”

And then Edward hugged me tightly, because nothing pleased him more than my overwhelming ecstasy in this new life.

And I was euphoric the vast majority of the time. The days were not long enough for me to get my fill of adoring my daughter; the nights did not have enough hours to satisfy my need for Edward.

There was a flipside to the joy, though. If you turned the fabric of our lives over, I imagined the design on the backside would be woven in the bleak grays of doubt and fear.

Renesmee spoke her first word when she was exactly one week old. The word was Momma, which would have made my day, except that I was so frightened by her progress I could barely force my frozen face to smile back at her. It didn’t help that she continued from her first word to her first sentence in the same breath. “Momma, where is Grandpa?” she’d asked in a clear, high soprano, only bothering to speak aloud because I was across the room from her. She’d already asked Rosalie, using her normal (or seriously abnormal, from another point of view) means of communication. Rosalie hadn’t known the answer, so Renesmee had turned to me.

When she walked for the first time, fewer than three weeks later, it was similar. She'd simply stared at Alice for a long moment, watching intently as her aunt arranged bouquets in the vases scattered around the room, dancing back and forth across the floor with her arms full of flowers. Renesmee got to her feet, not in the least bit shaky, and crossed the floor almost as gracefully.

Jacob had burst into applause, because that was clearly the response Renesmee wanted. The way he was tied to her made his own reactions secondary; his first reflex was always to give Renesmee whatever she needed. But our eyes met, and I saw all the panic in mine echoed in his. I made my hands clap together, too, trying to hide my fear from her. Edward applauded quietly at my side, and we didn't need to speak our thoughts to know they were the same.

Edward and Carlisle threw themselves into research, looking for any answers, anything to expect. There was very little to be found, and none of it verifiable. Alice and Rosalie usually began our day with a fashion show. Renesmee never wore the same clothes twice, partly because she outgrew her clothes almost immediately and partly because Alice and Rosalie were trying to create a baby album that appeared to span years rather than weeks. They took thousands of pictures, documenting every phase of her accelerated childhood.

At three months, Renesmee could have been a big one-year-old, or a small two-yearold. She wasn't shaped exactly like a toddler; she was leaner and more graceful, her proportions were more even, like

an adult's. Her bronze ringlets hung to her waist; I couldn't bear to cut them, even if Alice would have allowed it. Renesmee could speak with flawless grammar and articulation, but she rarely bothered, preferring to simply show people what she wanted. She could not only walk but run and dance. She could even read.

I'd been reading Tennyson to her one night, because the flow and rhythm of his poetry seemed restful. (I had to search constantly for new material; Renesmee didn't like repetition in her bedtime stories as other children supposedly did, and she had no patience for picture books.) She reached up to touch my cheek, the image in her mind one of us, only with her holding the book. I gave it to her, smiling.

" 'There is sweet music here,'" she read without hesitation, "'that softer falls than petals from blown roses on the grass, or night-dews on still waters between walls of shadowy granite, in a gleaming pass—' "

My hand was robotic as I took the book back.

"If you read, how will you fall asleep?" I asked in a voice that had barely escaped shaking.

By Carlisle's calculations, the growth of her body was gradually slowing; her mind continued to race on ahead. Even if the rate of decrease held steady, she'd still be an adult in no more than four years.

Four years. And an old woman by fifteen.

Just fifteen years of life.

But she was so healthy. Vital, bright, glowing, and happy. Her conspicuous well-being made it easy for me to be happy with her in the moment and leave the future for tomorrow.

Carlisle and Edward discussed our options for the future from every angle in low voices that I tried not to hear. They never had these discussions when Jacob was around, because there was one sure way to halt aging, and that wasn't something Jacob was likely to be excited about. I wasn't. Too dangerous! my instincts screamed at me. Jacob and Renesmee seemed alike in so many ways, both half-and-half beings, two things at the same time. And all the werewolf lore insisted that vampire venom was a death sentence rather than a course to immortality. . . .

Carlisle and Edward had exhausted the research they could do from a distance, and now we were preparing to follow old legends at their source. We were going back to Brazil, starting there. The Ticunas had legends about children like Renesmee.... If other children like her had ever existed, perhaps some tale of the life span of half-mortal children still lingered. . . .

The only real question left was exactly when we would go.

I was the holdup. A small part of it was that I wanted to stay near Forks until after the holidays, for Charlie's sake. But more than that, there was a different journey that I knew had to come first—that was the clear priority. Also, it had to be a solo trip.

This was the only argument that Edward and I had gotten in since I'd become a vampire. The main point of contention was the "solo" part. But the facts were what they were, and my plan was the only one that made rational sense. I had to go see the Volturi, and I had to do it absolutely alone.

Even freed from old nightmares, from any dreams at all, it was impossible to forget the Volturi. Nor did they leave us without reminders.

Until the day that Aro's present showed up, I didn't know that Alice had sent a wedding announcement to the Volturi leaders; we'd been far away on Esme's island when she'd seen a vision of Volturi soldiers—Jane and Alec, the devastatingly powerful twins, among them. Caius was planning to send a hunting party to see if I was still human, against their edict (because I knew about the secret vampire world, I either must join it or be silenced… permanently). So Alice had mailed the announcement, seeing that this would delay them as they deciphered the meaning behind it. But they would come eventually. That was certain.

The present itself was not overtly threatening. Extravagant, yes, almost frightening in that very extravagance. The threat was in the parting line of Aro's congratulatory note, written in black ink on a square of heavy, plain white paper in Aro's own hand: I so look forward to seeing the new Mrs. Cullen in person.

The gift was presented in an ornately carved, ancient wooden box inlaid with gold and mother-of-pearl,

ornamented with a rainbow of gemstones. Alice said the box itself was a priceless treasure, that it would have outshone just about any piece of jewelry besides the one inside it.

“I always wondered where the crown jewels disappeared to after John of England pawned them in the thirteenth century,” Carlisle said. “I suppose it doesn’t surprise me that the Volturi have their share.”

The necklace was simple—gold woven into a thick rope of a chain, almost scaled, like a smooth snake that would curl close around the throat. One jewel hung suspended from the rope: a white diamond the size of a golf ball.

The unsubtle reminder in Aro’s note interested me more than the jewel. The Volturi needed to see that I was immortal, that the Cullens had been obedient to the Volturi’s orders, and they needed to see this soon. They could not be allowed near Forks. There was only one way to keep our life here safe.

“You’re not going alone,” Edward had insisted through his teeth, his hands clenching into fists.

“They won’t hurt me,” I’d said as soothingly as I could manage, forcing my voice to sound sure. “They have no reason to. I’m a vampire. Case closed.”

“No. Absolutely no.”

“Edward, it’s the only way to protect her.”

And he hadn’t been able to argue with that. My logic was watertight. Even in the short time I’d known Aro, I’d been able to see that he was a collector—and his

most prized treasures were his living pieces. He coveted beauty, talent, and rarity in his immortal followers more than any jewel locked in his vaults. It was unfortunate enough that he'd begun to covet Alice's and Edward's abilities. I would give him no more reason to be jealous of Carlisle's family. Renesmee was beautiful and gifted and unique—she was one of a kind. He could not be allowed to see her, not even through someone's thoughts.

And I was the only one whose thoughts he could not hear. Of course I would go alone. Alice did not see any trouble with my trip, but she was worried by the indistinct quality of her visions. She said they were sometimes similarly hazy when there were outside decisions that might conflict but that had not been solidly resolved. This uncertainty made Edward, already hesitant, extremely opposed to what I had to do. He wanted to come with me as far as my connection in London, but I wouldn't leave Renesmee without both her parents. Carlisle was coming instead. It made both Edward and me a little more relaxed, knowing that Carlisle would be only a few hours away from me. Alice kept searching for the future, but the things she found were unrelated to what she was looking for. A new trend in the stock market; a possible visit of reconciliation from Irina, though her decision was not firm; a snowstorm that wouldn't hit for another six weeks; a call from Renée (I was practicing my "rough" voice, and getting better at it every day—to Renée's knowledge, I was still sick, but mending). We bought the tickets for Italy the day after Renesmee turned three months. I planned for it to be a very short trip, so I hadn't told Charlie about

it. Jacob knew, and he took Edward's view on things. However, today the argument was about Brazil. Jacob was determined to come with us.

The three of us, Jacob, Renesmee, and I, were hunting together. The diet of animal blood wasn't Renesmee's favorite thing—and that was why Jacob was allowed to come along. Jacob had made it a contest between them, and that made her more willing than anything else.

Renesmee was quite clear on the whole good vs. bad as it applied to hunting humans; she just thought that donated blood made a nice compromise. Human food filled her and it seemed compatible with her system, but she reacted to all varieties of solid food with the same martyred endurance I had once given cauliflower and lima beans. Animal blood was better than that, at least. She had a competitive nature, and the challenge of beating Jacob made her excited to hunt.

"Jacob," I said, trying to reason with him again while Renesmee danced ahead of us into the long clearing, searching for a scent she liked. "You've got obligations here. Seth, Leah—"

He snorted. "I'm not my pack's nanny. They've all got responsibilities in La Push anyway."

"Sort of like you? Are you officially dropping out of high school, then? If you're going to keep up with Renesmee, you're going to have to study a lot harder."

"It's just a sabbatical. I'll get back to school when things… slow down."

I lost my concentration on my side of the disagreement when he said that, and we both automatically looked at Renesmee. She was staring at the snowflakes fluttering high above her head, melting before they could stick to the yellowed grass in the long arrowhead-shaped meadow that we were standing in. Her ruffled ivory dress was just a shade darker than the snow, and her reddish-brown curls managed to shimmer, though the sun was buried deeply behind the clouds.

As we watched, she crouched for an instant and then sprang fifteen feet up into the air. Her little hands closed around a flake, and she dropped lightly to her feet. She turned to us with her shocking smile—truly, it wasn't something you could get used to—and opened her hands to show us the perfectly formed eight-pointed ice star in her palm before it melted.

"Pretty," Jacob called to her appreciatively. "But I think you're stalling, Nessie."

She bounded back to Jacob; he held his arms out at exactly the moment she leaped into them. They had the move perfectly synchronized. She did this when she had something to say. She still preferred not to speak aloud.

Renesmee touched his face, scowling adorably as we all listened to the sound of a small herd of elk moving farther into the wood.

"Suuuure you're not thirsty, Nessie," Jacob answered a little sarcastically, but more indulgently than anything else. "You're just afraid I'll catch the biggest one again!"

She flipped backward out of Jacob's arms, landing lightly on her feet, and rolled her eyes—she looked so much like Edward when she did that. Then she darted off toward the trees.

"Got it," Jacob said when I leaned as if to follow. He yanked his t-shirt off as he charged after her into the forest, already trembling. "It doesn't count if you cheat," he called to Renesmee.

I smiled at the leaves they left fluttering behind them, shaking my head. Jacob was more a child than Renesmee sometimes.

I paused, giving my hunters a few minutes' head start. It would be beyond simple to track them, and Renesmee would love to surprise me with the size of her prey. I smiled again.

The narrow meadow was very still, very empty. The fluttering snow was thinning above me, almost gone. Alice had seen that it wouldn't stick for many weeks. Usually Edward and I came together on these hunting trips. But Edward was with Carlisle today, planning the trip to Rio, talking behind Jacob's back.... I frowned. When I returned, I would take Jacob's side. He should come with us. He had as big a stake in this as any of us—his entire life was at stake, just like mine. While my thoughts were lost in the near future, my eyes swept the mountainside routinely, searching for prey, searching for danger. I didn't think about it; the urge was an automatic thing.

Or perhaps there was a reason for my scanning, some tiny trigger that my razor-sharp senses had caught before I realized it consciously.

As my eyes flitted across the edge of a distant cliff, standing out starkly blue-gray against the green-black forest, a glint of silver—or was it gold?—gripped my attention. My gaze zeroed in on the color that shouldn't have been there, so far away in the haze that an eagle wouldn't have been able to make it out. I stared. She stared back.

That she was a vampire was obvious. Her skin was marble white, the texture a million times smoother than human skin. Even under the clouds, she glistened ever so slightly. If her skin had not given her away, her stillness would have. Only vampires and statues could be so perfectly motionless.

Her hair was pale, pale blond, almost silver. This was the gleam that had caught my eye. It hung straight as a ruler to a blunt edge at her chin, parted evenly down the center. She was a stranger to me. I was absolutely certain I'd never seen her before, even as a human. None of the faces in my muddy memory were the same as this one. But I knew her at once from her dark golden eyes.

Irina had decided to come after all.

For one moment I stared at her, and she stared back. I wondered if she would guess immediately who I was as well. I half-raised my hand, about to wave, but her lip twisted the tiniest bit, making her face suddenly hostile.

I heard Renesmee's cry of victory from the forest, heard Jacob's echoing howl, and saw Irina's face jerk reflexively to the sound when it echoed to her a few seconds later. Her gaze cut slightly to the right, and I

knew what she was seeing. An enormous russet werewolf, perhaps the very one who had killed her Laurent. How long had she been watching us? Long enough to see our affectionate exchange before, I was sure. Her face spasmed in pain.

Instinctually, I opened my hands in front of me in an apologetic gesture. She turned back to me, and her lip curled back over her teeth. Her jaw unlocked as she growled. When the faint sound reached me, she had already turned and disappeared into the forest.

“Crap!” I groaned.

I sprinted into the forest after Renesmee and Jacob, unwilling to have them out of my sight. I didn’t know which direction Irina had taken, or exactly how furious she was right now. Vengeance was a common obsession for vampires, one that was not easy to suppress.

Running at full speed, it only took me two seconds to reach them.

“Mine is bigger,” I heard Renesmee insist as I burst through the thick thornbushes to the small open space where they stood.

Jacob’s ears flattened as he took in my expression; he crouched forward, baring his teeth

—his muzzle was streaked with blood from his kill. His eyes raked the forest. I could hear the growl building in his throat.

Renesmee was every bit as alert as Jacob. Abandoning the dead stag at her feet, she leaped into

my waiting arms, pressing her curious hands against my cheeks.

“I’m overreacting,” I assured them quickly. “It’s okay, I think. Hold on.”

I pulled out my cell phone and hit the speed dial. Edward answered on the first ring. Jacob and Renesmee listened intently to my side as I filled Edward in.

“Come, bring Carlisle,” I trilled so fast I wondered if Jacob could keep up. “I saw Irina, and she saw me, but then she saw Jacob and she got mad and ran away, I think. She hasn’t shown up here—yet, anyway—but she looked pretty upset so maybe she will. If she doesn’t, you and Carlisle have to go after her and talk to her. I feel so bad.”

Jacob rumbled.

“We’ll be there in half a minute,” Edward assured me, and I could hear the whoosh of the wind his running made.

We darted back to the long meadow and then waited silently as Jacob and I listened carefully for the sound of an approach we did not recognize.

When the sound came, though, it was very familiar. And then Edward was at my side, Carlisle a few seconds behind. I was surprised to hear the heavy pad of big paws following behind Carlisle. I supposed I shouldn’t have been shocked. With Renesmee in even a hint of danger, of course Jacob would call in reinforcements.

“She was up on that ridge,” I told them at once, pointing out the spot. If Irina was fleeing, she already had quite a head start. Would she stop and listen to Carlisle? Her expression before made me think not. “Maybe you should call Emmett and Jasper and have them come with you. She looked… really upset. She growled at me.”

“What?” Edward said angrily.

Carlisle put a hand on his arm. “She’s grieving. I’ll go after her.”

“I’m coming with you,” Edward insisted.

They exchanged a long glance—perhaps Carlisle was measuring Edward’s irritation with Irina against his helpfulness as a mind reader. Finally, Carlisle nodded, and they took off to find the trail without calling for Jasper or Emmett. Jacob huffed impatiently and poked my back with his nose. He must want Renesmee back at the safety of the house, just in case. I agreed with him on that, and we hurried home with Seth and Leah running at our flanks.

Renesmee was complacent in my arms, one hand still resting on my face. Since the hunting trip had been aborted, she would just have to make do with donated blood. Her thoughts were a little smug.

# Chapter 28

## THE FUTURE

Carlisle and Edward had not been able to catch up with Irina before her trail disappeared into the sound. They'd swum to the other bank to see if her trail had picked up in a straight line, but there was no trace of her for miles in either direction on the eastern shore.

It was all my fault. She had come, as Alice had seen, to make peace with the Cullens, only to be angered by my camaraderie with Jacob. I wished I'd noticed her earlier, before Jacob had phased. I wished we'd gone hunting somewhere else. There wasn't much to be done. Carlisle had called Tanya with the disappointing news. Tanya and Kate hadn't seen Irina since they'd decided to come to my wedding, and they were distraught that Irina had come so close and yet not returned home; it wasn't easy for them to lose their sister, however temporary the separation might be. I wondered if this brought back hard memories of losing their mother so many centuries ago. Alice was able to catch a few glimpses of Irina's immediate future, nothing too concrete. She wasn't going back to Denali, as far as Alice could tell. The picture was hazy. All Alice could see was that Irina was visibly upset; she wandered in the snowswathed wilderness—to the north? To the east?—with a devastated expression. She made no decisions for a new course beyond her directionless grieving. Days passed and, though of course I forgot nothing, Irina and her pain moved to the back of my mind. There were more important things to think of now. I would

leave for Italy in just a few days. When I got back, we'd all be off to South America. Every detail had been gone over a hundred times already. We would start with the Ticunas, tracing their legends as well as we could at the source. Now that it was accepted that Jacob would come with us, he figured prominently in the plans—it was unlikely that the people who believed in vampires would speak to any of us about their stories. If we dead-ended with the Ticunas, there were many closely related tribes in the area to research. Carlisle had some old friends in the Amazon; if we could find them, they might have information for us, too. Or at least a suggestion as to where else we might go for answers. It was unlikely that the three Amazon vampires had anything to do with the legends of vampire hybrids themselves, as they were all female. There was no way to know how long our search would take.

I hadn't told Charlie about the longer trip yet, and I stewed about what to say to him while Edward and Carlisle's discussion went on. How to break the news to him just right?

I stared at Renesmee while I debated internally. She was curled up on the sofa now, her breathing slow with heavy sleep, her tangled curls splayed wildly around her face. Usually, Edward and I took her back to our cottage to put her to bed, but tonight we lingered with the family, he and Carlisle deep in their planning session. Meanwhile, Emmett and Jasper were more excited about planning the hunting possibilities. The Amazon offered a change from our normal quarry. Jaguars and panthers, for example.

Emmett had a whim to wrestle with an anaconda. Esme and Rosalie were planning what they would pack. Jacob was off with Sam's pack, setting things up for his own absence.

Alice moved slowly—for her—around the big room, unnecessarily tidying the already immaculate space, straightening Esme's perfectly hung garlands. She was re-centering Esme's vases on the console at the moment. I could see from the way her face fluctuated

—aware, then blank, then aware again—that she was searching the future. I assumed she was trying to see through the blind spots that Jacob and Renesmee made in her visions as to what was waiting for us in South America until Jasper said, "Let it go, Alice; she's not our concern," and a cloud of serenity stole silently and invisibly through the room. Alice must have been worrying about Irina again.

She stuck her tongue out at Jasper and then lifted one crystal vase that was filled with white and red roses and turned toward the kitchen. There was just the barest hint of wilt to one of the white flowers, but Alice seemed intent on utter perfection as a distraction to her lack of vision tonight.

Staring at Renesmee again, I didn't see it when the vase slipped from Alice's fingers. I only heard the whoosh of the air whistling past the crystal, and my eyes flickered up in time to see the vase shatter into ten thousand diamond shards against the edge of the kitchen's marble floor.

We were perfectly still as the fragmented crystal bounced and skittered in every direction with an

unmusical tinkling, all eyes on Alice's back. My first illogical thought was that Alice was playing some joke on us. Because there was no way that Alice could have dropped the vase by accident. I could have darted across the room to catch the vase in plenty of time myself, if I hadn't assumed she would get it. And how would it fall through her fingers in the first place? Her perfectly sure fingers…

I had never seen a vampire drop anything by accident. Ever.

And then Alice was facing us, twisting in a move so fast it didn't exist. Her eyes were halfway here and halfway locked on the future, wide, staring, filling her thin face till they seemed to overflow it. Looking into her eyes was like looking out of a grave from the inside; I was buried in the terror and despair and agony of her gaze. I heard Edward gasp; it was a broken, half-choked sound.

"What? " Jasper growled, leaping to her side in a blurred rush of movement, crushing the broken crystal under his feet. He grabbed her shoulders and shook her sharply. She seemed to rattle silently in his hands. "What, Alice?"

Emmett moved into my peripheral vision, his teeth bared while his eyes darted toward the window, anticipating an attack.

There was only silence from Esme, Carlisle, and Rose, who were frozen just as I was. Jasper shook Alice again. "What is it?"

"They're coming for us," Alice and Edward whispered together, perfectly synchronized.

"All of them."

Silence.

For once, I was the quickest to understand—because something in their words triggered my own vision. It was only the distant memory of a dream—faint, transparent, indistinct as if I were peering through thick gauze.... In my head, I saw a line of black advancing on me, the ghost of my half-forgotten human nightmare. I could not see the glint of their ruby eyes in the shrouded image, or the shine of their sharp wet teeth, but I knew where the gleam should be. . . .

Stronger than the memory of the sight came the memory of the feel—the wrenching need to protect the precious thing behind me.

I wanted to snatch Renesmee up into my arms, to hide her behind my skin and hair, to make her invisible. But I couldn't even turn to look at her. I felt not like stone but ice. For the first time since I'd been reborn a vampire, I felt cold. I barely heard the confirmation of my fears. I didn't need it. I already knew.

"The Volturi," Alice moaned.

"All of them," Edward groaned at the same time.

"Why?" Alice whispered to herself. "How?"

"When?" Edward whispered.

“Why?” Esme echoed.

“When?” Jasper repeated in a voice like splintering ice. Alice’s eyes didn’t blink, but it was as if a veil covered them; they became perfectly blank. Only her mouth held on to her expression of horror.

“Not long,” she and Edward said together. Then she spoke alone. “There’s snow on the forest, snow on the town. Little more than a month.”

“Why?” Carlisle was the one to ask this time.

Esme answered. “They must have a reason. Maybe to see . . .”

“This isn’t about Bella,” Alice said hollowly. “They’re all coming—Aro, Caius, Marcus, every member of the guard, even the wives.”

“The wives never leave the tower,” Jasper contradicted her in a flat voice. “Never. Not during the southern rebellion. Not when the Romanians tried to overthrow them. Not even when they were hunting the immortal children. Never.”

“They’re coming now,” Edward whispered.

“But why?” Carlisle said again. “We’ve done nothing! And if we had, what could we possibly do that would bring this down on us?”

“There are so many of us,” Edward answered dully. “They must want to make sure that .

. .” He didn’t finish.

“That doesn’t answer the crucial question! Why?”

I felt I knew the answer to Carlisle's question, and yet at the same time I didn't. Renesmee was the reason why, I was sure. Somehow I'd known from the very beginning that they would come for her. My subconscious had warned me before I'd known I was carrying her. It felt oddly expected now. As if I'd somehow always known that the Volturi would come to take my happiness from me.

But that still didn't answer the question.

"Go back, Alice," Jasper pleaded. "Look for the trigger. Search."

Alice shook her head slowly, her shoulders sagging. "It came out of nowhere, Jazz. I wasn't looking for them, or even for us. I was just looking for Irina. She wasn't where I expected her to be. . . ." Alice trailed off, her eyes drifting again. She stared at nothing for a long second.

And then her head jerked up, her eyes hard as flint. I heard Edward catch his breath.

"She decided to go to them," Alice said. "Irina decided to go to the Volturi. And then they will decide.... It's as if they're waiting for her. Like their decision was already made, and just waiting on her. . . ."

It was silent again as we digested this. What would Irina tell the Volturi that would result in Alice's appalling vision?

"Can we stop her?" Jasper asked.

"There's no way. She's almost there."

"What is she doing?" Carlisle was asking, but I wasn't paying attention to the discussion now. All my focus was on the picture that was painstakingly coming together in my head.

I pictured Irina poised on the cliff, watching. What had she seen? A vampire and a werewolf who were best friends. I'd been focused on that image, one that would obviously explain her reaction. But that was not all that she'd seen. She'd also seen a child. An exquisitely beautiful child, showing off in the falling snow, clearly more than human...

Irina... the orphaned sisters... Carlisle had said that losing their mother to the Volturi's justice had made Tanya, Kate, and Irina purists when it came to the law. Just half a minute ago, Jasper had said the words himself: Not even when they were hunting the immortal children.... The immortal children—the unmentionable bane, the appalling taboo...

With Irina's past, how could she apply any other reading to what she'd seen that day in the narrow field? She had not been close enough to hear Renesmee's heart, to feel the heat radiating from her body. Renesmee's rosy cheeks could have been a trick on our part for all she knew.

After all, the Cullens were in league with werewolves. From Irina's point of view, maybe this meant nothing was beyond us....

Irina, wringing her hands in the snowy wilderness—not mourning Laurent, after all, but knowing it was her duty to turn the Cullens in, knowing what would happen to them if she did. Apparently her conscience

had won out over the centuries of friendship. And the Volturi's response to this kind of infraction was so automatic, it was already decided.

I turned and draped myself over Renesmee's sleeping body, covering her with my hair, burying my face in her curls.

"Think of what she saw that afternoon," I said in a low voice, interrupting whatever Emmett was beginning to say. "To someone who'd lost a mother because of the immortal children, what would Renesmee look like?"

Everything was silent again as the others caught up to where I was already.

"An immortal child," Carlisle whispered.

I felt Edward kneel beside me, wrap his arms over us both.

"But she's wrong," I went on. "Renesmee isn't like those other children. They were frozen, but she grows so much every day. They were out of control, but she never hurts Charlie or Sue or even shows them things that would upset them. She can control herself. She's already smarter than most adults. There would be no reason. . . ."

I babbled on, waiting for someone to exhale with relief, waiting for the icy tension in the room to relax as they realized I was right. The room just seemed to get colder. Eventually my small voice trailed off into silence.

No one spoke for a long time.

Then Edward whispered into my hair. "It's not the kind of crime they hold a trial for, love," he said quietly. "Aro's seen Irina's proof in her thoughts. They come to destroy, not to be reasoned with."

"But they're wrong," I said stubbornly.

"They won't wait for us to show them that."

His voice was still quiet, gentle, velvet… and yet the pain and desolation in the sound was unavoidable. His voice was like Alice's eyes before—like the inside of a tomb.

"What can we do?" I demanded.

Renesmee was so warm and perfect in my arms, dreaming peacefully. I'd worried so much about Renesmee's speeding age—worried that she would only have little over a decade of life…. That terror seemed ironic now.

Little over a month…

Was this the limit, then? I'd had more happiness than most people ever experienced. Was there some natural law that demanded equal shares of happiness and misery in the world? Was my joy overthrowing the balance? Was four months all I could have?

It was Emmett who answered my rhetorical question.

"We fight," he said calmly.

"We can't win," Jasper growled. I could imagine how his face would look, how his body would curve protectively over Alice's.

"Well, we can't run. Not with Demetri around." Emmett made a disgusted noise, and I knew instinctively that he was not upset by the idea of the Volturi's tracker but by the idea of running away. "And I don't know that we can't win," he said. "There are a few options to consider. We don't have to fight alone."

My head snapped up at that. "We don't have to sentence the Quileutes to death, either, Emmett!"

"Chill, Bella." His expression was no different from when he was contemplating fighting anacondas. Even the threat of annihilation couldn't change Emmett's perspective, his ability to thrill to a challenge. "I didn't mean the pack. Be realistic, though—do you think Jacob or Sam is going to ignore an invasion? Even if it wasn't about Nessie? Not to mention that, thanks to Irina, Aro knows about our alliance with the pack now, too. But I was thinking of our other friends."

Carlisle echoed me in a whisper. "Other friends we don't have to sentence to death."

"Hey, we'll let them decide," Emmett said in a placating tone. "I'm not saying they have to fight with us." I could see the plan refining itself in his head as he spoke. "If they'd just stand beside us, just long enough to make the Volturi hesitate. Bella's right, after all. If we could force them to stop and listen. Though that might take away any reason for a fight. . . ."

There was a hint of a smile on Emmett's face now. I was surprised no one had hit him yet. I wanted to.

"Yes," Esme said eagerly. "That makes sense, Emmett. All we need is for the Volturi to pause for one moment. Just long enough to listen."

"We'd need quite a show of witnesses," Rosalie said harshly, her voice brittle as glass. Esme nodded in agreement, as if she hadn't heard the sarcasm in Rosalie's tone. "We can ask that much of our friends. Just to witness."

"We'd do it for them," Emmett said.

"We'll have to ask them just right," Alice murmured. I looked to see her eyes were a dark void again. "They'll have to be shown very carefully."

"Shown?" Jasper asked.

Alice and Edward both looked down at Renesmee. Then Alice's eyes glazed over.

"Tanya's family," she said. "Siobhan's coven. Amun's. Some of the nomads—Garrett and Mary for certain. Maybe Alistair."

"What about Peter and Charlotte?" Jasper asked half fearfully, as if he hoped the answer was no, and his old brother could be spared from the coming carnage.

"Maybe."

"The Amazons?" Carlisle asked. "Kachiri, Zafrina, and Senna?"

Alice seemed too deep into her vision to answer at first; finally she shuddered, and her eyes flickered

back to the present. She met Carlisle's gaze for the tiniest part of a second, and then looked down.

"I can't see."

"What was that?" Edward asked, his whisper a demand. "That part in the jungle. Are we going to look for them?"

"I can't see," Alice repeated, not meeting his eyes. A flash of confusion crossed Edward's face. "We'll have to split up and hurry—before the snow sticks to the ground. We have to round up whomever we can and get them here to show them." She zoned again. "Ask Eleazar. There is more to this than just an immortal child."

The silence was ominous for another long moment while Alice was in her trance. She blinked slowly when it was over, her eyes peculiarly opaque despite the fact that she was clearly in the present.

"There is so much. We have to hurry," she whispered.

"Alice?" Edward asked. "That was too fast—I didn't understand. What was—?"

"I can't see!" she exploded back at him. "Jacob's almost here!"

Rosalie took a step toward the front door. "I'll deal with—"

"No, let him come," Alice said quickly, her voice straining higher with each word. She grabbed Jasper's hand and began pulling him toward the back door. "I'll see better away from Nessie, too. I need to

go. I need to really concentrate. I need to see everything I can. I have to go. Come on, Jasper, there's no time to waste!"

We all could hear Jacob on the stairs. Alice yanked, impatient, on Jasper's hand. He followed quickly, confusion in his eyes just like Edward's. They darted out the door into the silver night.

"Hurry!" she called back to us. "You have to find them all!"

"Find what?" Jacob asked, shutting the front door behind himself. "Where'd Alice go?"

No one answered; we all just stared.

Jacob shook the wet from his hair and pulled his arms through the sleeves of his t-shirt, his eyes on Renesmee. "Hey, Bells! I thought you guys would've gone home by now. . .

."

He looked up to me finally, blinked, and then stared. I watched his expression as the room's atmosphere finally touched him. He glanced down, eyes wide, at the wet spot on the floor, the scattered roses, the fragments of crystal. His fingers quivered.

"What?" he asked flatly. "What happened?"

I couldn't think where to begin. No one else found the words, either. Jacob crossed the room in three long strides and dropped to his knees beside Renesmee and me. I could feel the heat shaking off his body as tremors rolled down his arms to his shaking hands.

“Is she okay?” he demanded, touching her forehead, tilting his head as he listened to her heart. “Don’t mess with me, Bella, please!”

“Nothing’s wrong with Renesmee,” I choked out, the words breaking in strange places.

“Then who?”

“All of us, Jacob,” I whispered. And it was there in my voice, too—the sound of the inside of a grave. “It’s over. We’ve all been sentenced to die.”

# Chapter 29

## DEFECTION

We sat there all night long, statues of horror and grief, and Alice never came back. We were all at our limits—frenzied into absolute stillness. Carlisle had barely been able to move his lips to explain it all to Jacob. The retelling seemed to make it worse; even Emmett stood silent and still from then on.

It wasn't until the sun rose and I knew that Renesmee would soon be stirring under my hands that I wondered for the first time what could possibly be taking Alice so long. I'd hoped to know more before I was faced with my daughter's curiosity. To have some answers. Some tiny, tiny portion of hope so that I could smile and keep the truth from terrifying her, too.

My face felt permanently set into the fixed mask it had worn all night. I wasn't sure I had the ability to smile anymore.

Jacob was snoring in the corner, a mountain of fur on the floor, twitching anxiously in his sleep. Sam knew everything—the wolves were readying themselves for what was coming. Not that this preparation would do anything but get them killed with the rest of my family.

The sunlight broke through the back windows, sparkling on Edward's skin. My eyes had not moved from his since Alice's departure. We'd stared at each other all night, staring at what neither of us could live

through losing: the other. I saw my reflection glimmer in his agonized eyes as the sun touched my own skin.

His eyebrows moved an infinitesimal bit, then his lips.

“Alice,” he said.

The sound of his voice was like ice cracking as it melted. All of us fractured a little, softened a little. Moved again.

“She’s been gone a long time,” Rosalie murmured, surprised.

“Where could she be?” Emmett wondered, taking a step toward the door. Esme put a hand on her arm. “We don’t want to disturb . . .”

“She’s never taken so long before,” Edward said. New worry splintered the mask his face had become. His features were alive again, his eyes suddenly wide with fresh fear, extra panic. “Carlisle, you don’t think—something preemptive? Would Alice have had time to see if they sent someone for her?”

Aro’s translucent-skinned face filled my head. Aro, who had seen into all the corners of Alice’s mind, who knew everything she was capable of—

Emmett cussed loud enough that Jacob lurched to his feet with a growl. In the yard, his growl was echoed by his pack. My family was already a blur of action.

“Stay with Renesmee!” I all but shrieked at Jacob as I sprinted through the door. I was still stronger than the rest of them, and I used that strength to push

myself forward. I overtook Esme in a few bounds, and Rosalie in just a few strides more. I raced through the thick forest until I was right behind Edward and Carlisle.

“Would they have been able to surprise her?” Carlisle asked, his voice as even as if he were standing motionless rather than running at full speed.

“I don’t see how,” Edward answered. “But Aro knows her better than anyone else. Better than I do.”

“Is this a trap?” Emmett called from behind us.

“Maybe,” Edward said. “There’s no scent but Alice and Jasper. Where were they going?”

Alice and Jasper’s trail was curling into a wide arc; it stretched first east of the house, but headed north on the other side of the river, and then back west again after a few miles. We recrossed the river, all six jumping within a second of each other. Edward ran in the lead, his concentration total.

“Did you catch that scent?” Esme called ahead a few moments after we’d leaped the river for the second time. She was the farthest back, on the far left edge of our hunting party. She gestured to the southeast.

“Keep to the main trail—we’re almost to the Quileute border,” Edward ordered tersely.

“Stay together. See if they turned north or south.”

I was not as familiar with the treaty line as the rest of them, but I could smell the hint of wolf in the breeze blowing from the east. Edward and Carlisle slowed a

little out of habit, and I could see their heads sweep from side to side, waiting for the trail to turn. Then the wolf smell was suddenly stronger, and Edward's head snapped up. He came to a sudden stop. The rest of us froze, too.

"Sam?" Edward asked in a flat voice. "What is this?"

Sam came through the trees a few hundred yards away, walking quickly toward us in his human form, flanked by two big wolves—Paul and Jared. It took Sam a while to reach us; his human pace made me impatient. I didn't want time to think about what was happening. I wanted to be in motion, to be doing something. I wanted to have my arms around Alice, to know beyond a doubt that she was safe.

I watched Edward's face go absolutely white as he read what Sam was thinking. Sam ignored him, looking straight at Carlisle as he stopped walking and began to speak.

"Right after midnight, Alice and Jasper came to this place and asked permission to cross our land to the ocean. I granted them that and escorted them to the coast myself. They went immediately into the water and did not return. As we journeyed, Alice told me it was of the utmost importance that I say nothing to Jacob about seeing her until I spoke to you. I was to wait here for you to come looking for her and then give you this note. She told me to obey her as if all our lives depended on it."

Sam's face was grim as he held out a folded sheet of paper, printed all over with small black text. It was a page out of a book; my sharp eyes read the printed

words as Carlisle unfolded it to see the other side. The side facing me was the copyright page from The Merchant of Venice. A hint of my own scent blew off of it as Carlisle shook the paper flat. I realized it was a page torn from one of my books. I'd brought a few things from Charlie's house to the cottage; a few sets of normal clothes, all the letters from my mother, and my favorite books. My tattered collection of Shakespeare paperbacks had been on the bookshelf in the cottage's little living room yesterday morning....

"Alice has decided to leave us," Carlisle whispered.

"What?" Rosalie cried.

Carlisle turned the page around so that we all could read.

Don't look for us. There isn't time to waste. Remember: Tanya, Siobhan, Amun, Alistair, all the nomads you can find. We'll seek out Peter and Charlotte on our way. We're so sorry that we have to leave you this way, with no goodbyes or explanations. It's the only way for us. We love you.

We stood frozen again, the silence total but for the sound of the wolves' heartbeats, their breathing. Their thoughts must have been loud, too. Edward was first to move again, speaking in response to what he heard in Sam's head.

"Yes, things are that dangerous."

"Enough that you would abandon your family?" Sam asked out loud, censure in his tone. It was clear that he had not read the note before giving it to Carlisle.

He was upset now, looking as if he regretted listening to Alice.

Edward's expression was stiff—to Sam it probably looked angry or arrogant, but I could see the shape of pain in the hard planes of his face.

"We don't know what she saw," Edward said. "Alice is neither unfeeling nor a coward. She just has more information than we do."

"We would not—," Sam began.

"You are bound differently than we are," Edward snapped. "We each still have our free will."

Sam's chin jerked up, and his eyes looked suddenly flat black.

"But you should heed the warning," Edward went on. "This is not something you want to involve yourselves in. You can still avoid what Alice saw."

Sam smiled grimly. "We don't run away." Behind him, Paul snorted.

"Don't get your family slaughtered for pride," Carlisle interjected quietly. Sam looked at Carlisle with a softer expression. "As Edward pointed out, we don't have the same kind of freedom that you have. Renesmee is as much as part of our family now as she is yours. Jacob cannot abandon her, and we cannot abandon him." His eyes flickered to Alice's note, and his lips pressed into a thin line.

"You don't know her," Edward said.

“Do you?” Sam asked bluntly.

Carlisle put a hand on Edward’s shoulder. “We have much to do, son. Whatever Alice’s decision, we would be foolish not to follow her advice now. Let’s go home and get to work.”

Edward nodded, his face still rigid with pain. Behind me, I could hear Esme’s quiet, tearless sobs.

I didn’t know how to cry in this body; I couldn’t do anything but stare. There was no feeling yet. Everything seemed unreal, like I was dreaming again after all these months. Having a nightmare.

“Thank you, Sam,” Carlisle said.

“I’m sorry,” Sam answered. “We shouldn’t have let her through.”

“You did the right thing,” Carlisle told him. “Alice is free to do what she will. I wouldn’t deny her that liberty.”

I’d always thought of the Cullens as a whole, an indivisible unit. Suddenly, I remembered that it had not always been so. Carlisle had created Edward, Esme, Rosalie and Emmett; Edward had created me. We were physically linked by blood and venom. I never thought of Alice and Jasper as separate—as adopted into the family. But in truth, Alice had adopted the Cullens. She had shown up with her unconnected past, bringing Jasper with his, and fit herself into the family that was already there. Both she and Jasper had known another life outside the Cullen family. Had she really chosen to lead another

new life after she'd seen that life with the Cullens was over?

We were doomed, then, weren't we? There was no hope at all. Not one ray, one flicker that might have convinced Alice she had a chance at our side.

The bright morning air seemed thicker suddenly, blacker, as if physically darkened by my despair.

"I'm not going down without a fight," Emmett snarled low under his breath. "Alice told us what to do. Let's get it done."

The others nodded with determined expressions, and I realized that they were banking on whatever chance Alice had given us. That they were not going to give in to hopelessness and wait to die.

Yes, we all would fight. What else was there? And apparently we would involve others, because Alice had said so before she'd left us. How could we not follow Alice's last warning? The wolves, too, would fight with us for Renesmee.

We would fight, they would fight, and we all would die.

I didn't feel the same resolve the others seemed to feel. Alice knew the odds. She was giving us the only chance she could see, but the chance was too slim for her to bet on it. I felt already beaten as I turned my back on Sam's critical face and followed Carlisle toward home.

We ran automatically now, not the same panicked hurry as before. As we neared the river, Esme's head lifted.

"There was that other trail. It was fresh."

She nodded forward, toward where she had called Edward's attention on the way here. While we were racing to save Alice…

"It has to be from earlier in the day. It was just Alice, without Jasper," Edward said lifelessly.

Esme's face puckered, and she nodded.

I drifted to the right, falling a little behind. I was sure Edward was right, but at the same time… After all, how had Alice's note ended up on a page from my book?

"Bella?" Edward asked in an emotionless voice as I hesitated.

"I want to follow the trail," I told him, smelling the light scent of Alice that led away from her earlier flight path. I was new to this, but it smelled exactly the same to me, just minus the scent of Jasper.

Edward's golden eyes were empty. "It probably just leads back to the house."

"Then I'll meet you there."

At first I thought he would let me go alone, but then, as I moved a few steps away, his blank eyes flickered to life.

"I'll come with you," he said quietly. "We'll meet you at home, Carlisle."

Carlisle nodded, and the others left. I waited until they were out of sight, and then I looked at Edward questioningly.

"I couldn't let you walk away from me," he explained in a low voice. "It hurt just to imagine it."

I understood without more explanation than that. I thought of being divided from him now and realized I would have felt the same pain, no matter how short the separation. There was so little time left to be together.

I held my hand out to him, and he took it.

"Let's hurry," he said. "Renesmee will be awake."

I nodded, and we were running again.

It was probably a silly thing, to waste the time away from Renesmee just for curiosity's sake. But the note bothered me. Alice could have carved the note into a boulder or tree trunk if she lacked writing utensils. She could have stolen a pad of Post-its from any of the houses by the highway. Why my book? When did she get it?

Sure enough, the trail led back to the cottage by a circuitous route that stayed far clear of the Cullens' house and the wolves in the nearby woods. Edward's brows tightened in confusion as it became obvious where the trail led.

He tried to reason it out. “She left Jasper to wait for her and came here?”

We were almost to the cottage now, and I felt uneasy. I was glad to have Edward’s hand in mine, but I also felt as if I should be here alone. Tearing out the page and carrying it back to Jasper was such an odd thing for Alice to do. It felt like there was a message in her action—one I didn’t understand at all. But it was my book, so the message must be for me. If it were something she wanted Edward to know, wouldn’t she have pulled a page from one of his books… ?

“Give me just a minute,” I said, pulling my hand free as we got to the door. His forehead creased. “Bella?”

“Please? Thirty seconds.”

I didn’t wait for him to answer. I darted through the door, pulling it shut behind me. I went straight to the bookshelf. Alice’s scent was fresh—less than a day old. A fire that I had not set burned low but hot in the fireplace. I yanked The Merchant of Venice off the shelf and flipped it open to the title page.

There, next to the feathered edge left by the torn page, under the words The Merchant of Venice by William Shakespeare, was a note.

Destroy this.

Below that was a name and an address in Seattle.

When Edward came through the door after only thirteen seconds rather than thirty, I was watching the book burn.

"What's going on, Bella?"

"She was here. She ripped a page out of my book to write her note on."

"Why?"

"I don't know why."

"Why are you burning it?"

"I—I—" I frowned, letting all my frustration and pain show on my face. I did not know what Alice was trying to tell me, only that she'd gone to great lengths to keep it from anyone but me. The one person whose mind Edward could not read. So she must want to keep him in the dark, and it was probably for a good reason. "It seemed appropriate."

"We don't know what she's doing," he said quietly.

I stared into the flames. I was the only person in the world who could lie to Edward. Was that what Alice wanted from me? Her last request?

"When we were on the plane to Italy," I whispered—this was not a lie, except perhaps in context—"on our way to rescue you… she lied to Jasper so that he wouldn't come after us. She knew that if he faced the Volturi, he would die. She was willing to die herself rather than put him in danger. Willing for me to die, too. Willing for you to die."

Edward didn't answer.

“She has her priorities,” I said. It made my still heart ache to realize that my explanation did not feel like a lie in any way.

“I don’t believe it,” Edward said. He didn’t say it like he was arguing with me—he said it like he was arguing with himself. “Maybe it was just Jasper in danger. Her plan would work for the rest of us, but he’d be lost if he stayed. Maybe . . .”

“She could have told us that. Sent him away.”

“But would Jasper have gone? Maybe she’s lying to him again.”

“Maybe,” I pretended to agree. “We should go home. There’s no time.”

Edward took my hand, and we ran.

Alice’s note did not make me hopeful. If there were any way to avoid the coming slaughter, Alice would have stayed. I couldn’t see another possibility. So it was something else she was giving me. Not a way to escape. But what else would she think that I wanted? Maybe a way to salvage something? Was there anything I could still save?

Carlisle and the others had not been idle in our absence. We’d been separated from them for all of five minutes, and they were already prepared to leave. In the corner, Jacob was human again, with Renesmee on his lap, both of them watching us with wide eyes. Rosalie had traded her silk wrap dress for a sturdy-looking pair of jeans, running shoes, and a button-down shirt made of the thick weave that backpackers

used for long trips. Esme was dressed similarly. There was a globe on the coffee table, but they were done looking at it, just waiting for us.

The atmosphere was more positive now than before; it felt good to them to be in action. Their hopes were pinned on Alice's instructions.

I looked at the globe and wondered where we were headed first.

"We're to stay here?" Edward asked, looking at Carlisle. He didn't sound happy.

"Alice said that we would have to show people Renesmee, and we would have to be careful about it," Carlisle said. "We'll send whomever we can find back here to you—

Edward, you'll be the best at fielding that particular minefield."

Edward gave one sharp nod, still not happy. "There's a lot of ground to cover."

"We're splitting up," Emmett answered. "Rose and I are hunting for nomads."

"You'll have your hands full here," Carlisle said. "Tanya's family will be here in the morning, and they have no idea why. First, you have to persuade them not to react the way Irina did. Second, you've got to find out what Alice meant about Eleazar. Then, after all that, will they stay to witness for us? It will start again as the others come—if we can persuade anyone to come in the first place." Carlisle sighed. "Your job

may well be the hardest. We'll be back to help as soon as we can."

Carlisle put his hand on Edward's shoulder for a second and then kissed my forehead. Esme hugged us both, and Emmett punched us both on the arm. Rosalie forced a hard smile for Edward and me, blew a kiss to Renesmee, and then gave Jacob a parting grimace.

"Good luck," Edward told them.

"And to you," Carlisle said. "We'll all need it."

I watched them leave, wishing I could feel whatever hope bolstered them, and wishing I could be alone with the computer for just a few seconds. I had to figure out who this J. Jenks person was and why Alice had gone to such lengths to give his name to only me. Renesmee twisted in Jacob's arms to touch his cheek.

"I don't know if Carlisle's friends will come. I hope so. Sounds like we're a little outnumbered right now," Jacob murmured to Renesmee.

So she knew. Renesmee already understood only too clearly what was going on. The whole imprinted-werewolf-gives-the-object-of-his-imprinting-whatever-she-wants thing was getting old pretty fast. Wasn't shielding her more important than answering her questions?

I looked carefully at her face. She did not look frightened, only anxious and very serious as she conversed with Jacob in her silent way.

“No, we can’t help; we’ve got to stay here,” he went on. “People are coming to see you, not the scenery.”

Renesmee frowned at him.

“No, I don’t have to go anywhere,” he said to her. Then he looked at Edward, his face stunned by the realization that he might be wrong. “Do I?”

Edward hesitated.

“Spit it out,” Jacob said, his voice raw with tension. He was right at his breaking point, just like the rest of us.

“The vampires who are coming to help us are not the same as we are,” Edward said.

“Tanya’s family is the only one besides ours with a reverence for human life, and even they don’t think much of werewolves. I think it might be safer—”

“I can take care of myself,” Jacob interrupted.

“Safer for Renesmee,” Edward continued, “if the choice to believe our story about her is not tainted by an association with werewolves.”

“Some friends. They’d turn on you just because of who you hang out with now?”

“I think they would mostly be tolerant under normal circumstances. But you need to understand—accepting Nessie will not be a simple thing for any of them. Why make it even the slightest bit harder?”

Carlisle had explained the laws about immortal children to Jacob last night. "The immortal children were really that bad?" he asked.

"You can't imagine the depth of the scars they've left in the collective vampire psyche."

"Edward . . ." It was still odd to hear Jacob use Edward's name without bitterness.

"I know, Jake. I know how hard it is to be away from her. We'll play it by ear— see how they react to her. In any case, Nessie is going to have to be incognito off and on in the next few weeks. She'll need to stay at the cottage until the right moment for us to introduce her. As long as you keep a safe distance from the main house . . ."

"I can do that. Company in the morning, huh?"

"Yes. The closest of our friends. In this particular case, it's probably better if we get things out in the open as soon as possible. You can stay here. Tanya knows about you. She's even met Seth."

"Right."

"You should tell Sam what's going on. There might be strangers in the woods soon."

"Good point. Though I owe him some silence after last night."

"Listening to Alice is usually the right thing."

Jacob's teeth ground together, and I could see that he shared Sam's feelings about what Alice and Jasper had done.

While they were talking, I wandered toward the back windows, trying to look distracted and anxious. Not a difficult thing to do. I leaned my head against the wall that curved away from the living room toward the dining room, right next to one of the computer desks. I ran my fingers against the keys while staring into the forest, trying to make it look like an absentminded thing. Did vampires ever do things absentmindedly? I didn't think anyone was paying particular attention to me, but I didn't turn to make sure. The monitor glowed to life. I stroked my fingers across the keys again. Then I drummed them very quietly on the wooden desktop, just to make it seem random. Another stroke across the keys.

I scanned the screen in my peripheral vision.

No J. Jenks, but there was a Jason Jenks. A lawyer. I brushed the keyboard, trying to keep a rhythm, like the preoccupied stroking of a cat you'd all but forgotten on your lap. Jason Jenks had a fancy website for his firm, but the address on the homepage was wrong. In Seattle, but in a different zip code. I noted the phone number and then stroked the keyboard in rhythm. This time I searched the address, but nothing at all came up, as if the address didn't exist. I wanted to look at a map, but I decided I was pushing my luck. One more brush, to delete the history. . . .

I continued staring out the window and brushed the wood a few times. I heard light footsteps crossing the floor to me, and I turned with what I hoped was the same expression as before.

Renesmee reached for me, and I held my arms open. She launched herself into them, smelling strongly of werewolf, and nestled her head against my neck. I didn't know if I could stand this. As much as I feared for my life, for Edward's, for the rest of my family's, it was not the same as the gut-wrenching terror I felt for my daughter. There had to be a way to save her, even if that was the only thing I could do. Suddenly, I knew that this was all I wanted anymore. The rest I would bear if I had to, but not her life being forfeited. Not that.

She was the one thing I simply had to save.

Would Alice have known how I would feel?

Renesmee's hand touched my cheek lightly.

She showed me my own face, Edward's, Jacob's, Rosalie's, Esme's, Carlisle's, Alice's, Jasper's, flipping through all our family's faces faster and faster. Seth and Leah. Charlie, Sue, and Billy. Over and over again. Worrying, like the rest of us were. She was only worrying, though. Jake had kept the worst from her as far as I could tell. The part about how we had no hope, how we all were going to die in a month's time. She settled on Alice's face, longing and confused. Where was Alice?

"I don't know," I whispered. "But she's Alice. She's doing the right thing, like always."

The right thing for Alice, anyway. I hated thinking of her that way, but how else could the situation be understood?

Renesmee sighed, and the longing intensified.

“I miss her, too.”

I felt my face working, trying to find the expression that went with the grief inside. My eyes felt strange and dry; they blinked against the uncomfortable feeling. I bit my lip. When I took my next breath, the air hitched in my throat, like I was choking on it. Renesmee pulled back to look at me, and I saw my face mirrored in her thoughts and in her eyes. I looked like Esme had this morning.

So this was what it felt like to cry.

Renesmee’s eyes glistened wetly as she watched my face. She stroked my face, showing me nothing, just trying to soothe me.

I’d never thought to see the mother-daughter bond reversed between us, the way it had always been for Renée and me. But I hadn’t had a very clear view of the future. A tear welled up on the edge of Renesmee’s eye. I wiped it away with a kiss. She touched her eye in amazement and then looked at the wetness on her fingertip.

“Don’t cry,” I told her. “It’s going to be okay. You’re going to be fine. I will find you a way through this.”

If there was nothing else I could do, I would still save my Renesmee. I was more positive than ever that this

was what Alice would give me. She would know. She would have left me a way.

# Chapter 30

## IRRESISTIBLE

There was so much to think about.

How was I going to find time alone to hunt down J. Jenks, and why did Alice want me to know about him?

If Alice's clue had nothing to do with Renesmee, what could I do to save my daughter?

How were Edward and I going to explain things to Tanya's family in the morning? What if they reacted like Irina? What if it turned into a fight?

I didn't know how to fight. How was I going to learn in just a month? Was there any chance at all that I could be taught fast enough that I might be a danger to any one member of the Volturi? Or was I doomed to be totally useless? Just another easily dispatched newborn?

So many answers I needed, but I did not get the chance to ask my questions. Wanting some normality for Renesmee, I'd insisted on taking her home to our cottage at bedtime. Jacob was more comfortable in his wolf form at the moment; the stress was easier dealt with when he felt ready for a fight. I wished that I could feel the same, could feel ready. He ran in the woods, on guard again.

After she was deeply under, I put Renesmee in her bed and then went to the front room to ask my questions of Edward. The ones I was able to ask, at

any rate; one of the most difficult of problems was the idea of trying to hide anything from him, even with the advantage of my silent thoughts.

He stood with his back to me, staring into the fire.

"Edward, I—"

He spun and was across the room in what seemed like no time at all, not even the smallest part of a second. I only had time to register the ferocious expression on his face before his lips were crushing against mine and his arms were locked around me like steel girders.

I didn't think of my questions again for the rest of that night. It didn't take long for me to grasp the reason for his mood, and even less time to feel exactly the same way. I'd been planning on needing years just to somewhat organize the overwhelming passion I felt for him physically. And then centuries after that to enjoy it. If we had only a month left together… Well, I didn't see how I could stand to have this end. For the moment I couldn't help but be selfish. All I wanted was to love him as much as possible in the limited time given to me.

It was hard to pull myself away from him when the sun came up, but we had our job to do, a job that might be more difficult than all the rest of our family's searches put together. As soon as I let myself think of what was coming, I was all tension; it felt like my nerves were being stretched on a rack, thinner and thinner.

"I wish there was a way to get the information we need from Eleazar before we tell them about Nessie," Edward muttered as we hurriedly dressed in the huge closet that was more reminder of Alice than I wanted at the moment. "Just in case."

"But he wouldn't understand the question to answer it," I agreed. "Do you think they'll let us explain?"

"I don't know."

I pulled Renesmee, still sleeping, from her bed and held her close so that her curls were pressed against my face; her sweet scent, so close, overpowered every other smell. I couldn't waste one second of time today. There were answers I needed, and wasn't sure how much time Edward and I would have alone today. If all went well with Tanya's family, hopefully we would have company for an extended period.

"Edward, will you teach me how to fight?" I asked him, tensed for his reaction, as he held the door for me.

It was what I expected. He froze, and then his eyes swept over me with a deep significance, like he was looking at me for the first or last time. His eyes lingered on our daughter sleeping in my arms.

"If it comes to a fight, there won't be much any of us can do," he hedged. I kept my voice even. "Would you leave me unable to defend myself?"

He swallowed convulsively, and the door shuddered, hinges protesting, as his hand tightened. Then he

nodded. “When you put it that way… I suppose we should get to work as soon as we can.”

I nodded, too, and we started toward the big house. We didn’t hurry. I wondered what I could do that would have any hope of making a difference. I was a tiny bit special, in my own way—if a having a supernaturally thick skull could really be considered special. Was there any use that I could put that toward?

“What would you say their biggest advantage is? Do they even have a weakness?”

Edward didn’t have to ask to know I meant the Volturi.

“Alec and Jane are their greatest offense,” he said emotionlessly, like we were talking of a basketball team. “Their defensive players rarely see any real action.”

“Because Jane can burn you where you stand—mentally at least. What does Alec do?

Didn’t you once say he was even more dangerous than Jane?”

“Yes. In a way, he is the antidote to Jane. She makes you feel the worst pain imaginable. Alec, on the other hand, makes you feel nothing. Absolutely nothing. Sometimes, when the Volturi are feeling kind, they have Alec anesthetize someone before he is executed. If he has surrendered or pleased them in some other way.”

"Anesthetic? But how is that more dangerous than Jane?"

"Because he cuts off your senses altogether. No pain, but also no sight or sound or smell. Total sensory deprivation. You are utterly alone in the blackness. You don't even feel it when they burn you."

I shivered. Was this the best we could hope for? To not see or feel death when it came?

"That would make him only equally as dangerous as Jane," Edward went on in the same detached voice, "in that they both can incapacitate you, make you into a helpless target. The difference between them is like the difference between Aro and me. Aro hears the mind of only one person at a time. Jane can only hurt the one object of her focus. I can hear everyone at the same time."

I felt cold as I saw where he was going. "And Alec can incapacitate us all at the same time?" I whispered.

"Yes," he said. "If he uses his gift against us, we will all stand blind and deaf until they get around to killing us—maybe they'll simply burn us without bothering to tear us apart first. Oh, we could try to fight, but we'll be more likely to hurt one another than we would be to hurt one of them."

We walked in silence for a few seconds.

An idea was shaping itself in my head. Not very promising, but better than nothing.

"Do you think Alec is a very good fighter?" I asked. "Aside from what he can do, I mean. If he had to fight without his gift. I wonder if he's ever even tried. . . ."

Edward glanced at me sharply. "What are you thinking?"

I looked straight ahead. "Well, he probably can't do that to me, can he? If what he does is like Aro and Jane and you. Maybe… if he's never really had to defend himself… and I learned a few tricks—"

"He's been with the Volturi for centuries," Edward cut me off, his voice abruptly panicked. He was probably seeing the same image in his head that I was: the Cullens standing helpless, senseless pillars on the killing field—all but me. I'd be the only one who could fight. "Yes, you're surely immune to his power, but you are still a newborn, Bella. I can't make you that strong a fighter in a few weeks. I'm sure he's had training."

"Maybe, maybe not. It's the one thing I can do that no one else can. Even if I can just distract him for a while—" Could I last long enough to give the others a chance?

"Please, Bella," Edward said through his teeth. "Let's not talk about this."

"Be reasonable."

"I will try to teach you what I can, but please don't make me think about you sacrificing yourself as a diversion—" He choked, and didn't finish.

I nodded. I would keep my plans to myself, then. First Alec and then, if I was miraculously lucky enough to win, Jane. If I could only even things out—remove the Volturi's overwhelming offensive advantage. Maybe then there was a chance…. My mind raced ahead. What if I was able to distract or even take them out? Honestly, why would either Jane or Alec ever have needed to learn battle skills? I couldn't imagine petulant little Jane surrendering her advantage, even to learn. If I was able to kill them, what a difference that would make.

"I have to learn everything. As much as you can possibly cram into my head in the next month," I murmured.

He acted as if I hadn't spoken.

Who next, then? I might as well have my plans in order so that, if I did live past attacking Alec, there would be no hesitation in my strike. I tried to think of another situation where my thick skull would give me an advantage. I didn't know enough about what the others did. Obviously, fighters like the huge Felix were beyond me. I could only try to give Emmett his fair fight there. I didn't know much about the rest of the Volturi guard, besides Demetri. . . .

My face was perfectly smooth as I considered Demetri. Without a doubt, he would be a fighter. There was no other way he could have survived so long, always at the spear point of any attack. And he must always lead, because he was their tracker—the best tracker in the world, no doubt. If there had been one better,

the Volturi would have traded up. Aro didn't surround himself with second best.

If Demetri didn't exist, then we could run. Whoever was left of us, in any case. My daughter, warm in my arms… Someone could run with her. Jacob or Rosalie, whoever was left.

And… if Demetri didn't exist, then Alice and Jasper could be safe forever. Is that what Alice had seen? That part of our family could continue? The two of them, at the very least.

Could I begrudge her that?

"Demetri…," I said.

"Demetri is mine," Edward said in a hard, tight voice. I looked at him quickly and saw that his expression had turned violent.

"Why?" I whispered.

He didn't answer at first. We were to the river when he finally murmured, "For Alice. It's the only thanks I can give her now for the last fifty years."

So his thoughts were in line with mine.

I heard Jacob's heavy paws thudding against the frozen ground. In seconds, he was pacing beside me, his dark eyes focused on Renesmee.

I nodded to him once, then returned to my questions. There was so little time.

"Edward, why do you think Alice told us to ask Eleazar about the Volturi? Has he been in Italy recently or something? What could he know?"

"Eleazar knows everything when it comes to the Volturi. I forgot you didn't know. He used to be one of them."

I hissed involuntarily. Jacob growled beside me.

"What?" I demanded, in my head picturing the beautiful dark-haired man at our wedding wrapped in a long, ashy cloak.

Edward's face was softer now—he smiled a little. "Eleazar is a very gentle person. He wasn't entirely happy with the Volturi, but he respected the law and its need to be upheld. He felt he was working toward the greater good. He doesn't regret his time with them. But when he found Carmen, he found his place in this world. They are very similar people, both very compassionate for vampires." He smiled again. "They met Tanya and her sisters, and they never looked back. They are well suited to this lifestyle. If they'd never found Tanya, I imagine they would have eventually discovered a way to live without human blood on their own."

The pictures in my head were jarring. I couldn't make them match up. A compassionate Volturi soldier?

Edward glanced at Jacob and answered a silent question. "No, he wasn't one of their warriors, so to speak. He had a gift they found convenient."

Jacob must have asked the obvious follow-up question.

“He has an instinctive feel for the gifts of others—the extra abilities that some vampires have,” Edward told him. “He could give Aro a general idea of what any given vampire was capable of just by being in proximity with him or her. This was helpful when the Volturi went into battle. He could warn them if someone in the opposing coven had a skill that might give them some trouble. That was rare; it takes quite a skill to even inconvenience the Volturi for a moment. More often, the warning would give Aro the chance to save someone who might be useful to him. Eleazar’s gift works even with humans, to an extent. He has to really concentrate with humans, though, because the latent ability is so nebulous. Aro would have him test the people who wanted to join, to see if they had any potential. Aro was sorry to see him go.”

“They let him go?” I asked. “Just like that?”

His smile was darker now, a little twisted. “The Volturi aren’t supposed to be the villains, the way they seem to you. They are the foundation of our peace and civilization. Each member of the guard chooses to serve them. It’s quite prestigious; they all are proud to be there, not forced to be there.”

I scowled at the ground.

“They’re only alleged to be heinous and evil by the criminals, Bella.”

“We’re not criminals.”

Jacob huffed in agreement.

"They don't know that."

"Do you really think we can make them stop and listen?"

Edward hesitated just the tiniest moment and then shrugged. "If we find enough friends to stand beside us. Maybe."

If. I suddenly felt the urgency of what we had before us today. Edward and I both started to move faster, breaking into a run. Jacob caught up quickly.

"Tanya shouldn't be too much longer," Edward said. "We need to be ready."

How to be ready, though? We arranged and rearranged, thought and rethought. Renesmee in full view? Or hidden at first? Jacob in the room? Or outside? He'd told his pack to stay close but invisible. Should he do the same?

In the end, Renesmee, Jacob—in his human form again—and I waited around the corner from the front door in the dining room, sitting at the big polished table. Jacob let me hold Renesmee; he wanted space in case he had to phase quickly. Though I was glad to have her in my arms, it made me feel useless. It reminded me that in a fight with mature vampires, I was no more than an easy target; I didn't need my hands free.

I tried to remember Tanya, Kate, Carmen, and Eleazar from the wedding. Their faces were murky in my ill-lit memories. I only knew they were beautiful, two

blondes and two brunettes. I couldn't remember if there was any kindness in their eyes. Edward leaned motionlessly against the back window wall, staring toward the front door. It didn't look like he was seeing the room in front of him. We listened to the cars zooming past out on the freeway, none of them slowing. Renesmee nestled into my neck, her hand against my cheek but no images in my head. She didn't have pictures for her feelings now.

"What if they don't like me?" she whispered, and all our eyes flashed to her face.

"Of course they'll—," Jacob started to say, but I silenced him with a look.

"They don't understand you, Renesmee, because they've never met anyone like you," I told her, not wanting to lie to her with promises that might not come true. "Getting them to understand is the problem."

She sighed, and in my head flashed pictures of all of us in one quick burst. Vampire, human, werewolf. She fit nowhere.

"You're special, that's not a bad thing."

She shook her head in disagreement. She thought of our strained faces and said, "This is my fault."

"No," Jacob, Edward, and I all said at exactly the same time, but before we could argue further, we heard the sound we'd been waiting for: the slowing of an engine on the freeway, the tires moving from pavement to soft dirt.

Edward darted around the corner to stand waiting by the door. Renesmee hid in my hair. Jacob and I stared at each other across the table, desperation on our faces. The car moved quickly through the woods, faster than Charlie or Sue drove. We heard it pull into the meadow and stop by the front porch. Four doors opened and closed. They didn't speak as they approached the door. Edward opened it before they could knock.

"Edward!" a female voice enthused.

"Hello, Tanya. Kate, Eleazar, Carmen."

Three murmured hellos.

"Carlisle said he needed to talk to us right away," the first voice said, Tanya. I could hear that they all were still outside. I imagined Edward in the doorway, blocking their entrance. "What's the problem? Trouble with the werewolves?"

Jacob rolled his eyes.

"No," Edward said. "Our truce with the werewolves is stronger than ever."

A woman chuckled.

"Aren't you going to invite us in?" Tanya asked. And then she continued without waiting for an answer. "Where's Carlisle?"

"Carlisle had to leave."

There was a short silence.

"What's going on, Edward?" Tanya demanded.

"If you could give me the benefit of the doubt for just a few minutes," he answered. "I have something difficult to explain, and I'll need you to be open-minded until you understand."

"Is Carlisle all right?" a male voice asked anxiously. Eleazar.

"None of us is all right, Eleazar," Edward said, and then he patted something, maybe Eleazar's shoulder. "But physically, Carlisle is fine."

"Physically?" Tanya asked sharply. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that my entire family is in very grave danger. But before I explain, I ask for your promise. Listen to everything I say before you react. I am begging you to hear me out."

A longer silence greeted his request. Through the strained hush, Jacob and I stared wordlessly at each other. His russet lips paled.

"We're listening," Tanya finally said. "We will hear it all before we judge."

"Thank you, Tanya," Edward said fervently. "We wouldn't involve you in this if we had any other choice."

Edward moved. We heard four sets of footsteps walk through the doorway. Someone sniffed. "I knew those werewolves were involved," Tanya muttered.

"Yes, and they're on our side. Again."

The reminder silenced Tanya.

“Where’s your Bella?” one of the other female voices asked. “How is she?”

“She’ll join us shortly. She’s well, thank you. She’s taken to immortality with amazing finesse.”

“Tell us about the danger, Edward,” Tanya said quietly. “We’ll listen, and we’ll be on your side, where we belong.”

Edward took a deep breath. “I’d like you to witness for yourselves first. Listen—in the other room. What do you hear?”

It was quiet, and then there was movement.

“Just listen first, please,” Edward said.

“A werewolf, I assume. I can hear his heart,” Tanya said.

“What else?” Edward asked.

There was a pause.

“What is that thrumming?” Kate or Carmen asked. “Is that… some kind of a bird?”

“No, but remember what you’re hearing. Now, what do you smell? Besides the werewolf.”

“Is there a human here?” Eleazar whispered.

“No,” Tanya disagreed. “It’s not human… but… closer to human than the rest of the scents here. What is that, Edward? I don’t think I’ve ever smelled that fragrance before.”

"You most certainly have not, Tanya. Please, please remember that this is something entirely new to you. Throw away your preconceived notions."

"I promised you I would listen, Edward."

"All right, then. Bella? Bring out Renesmee, please."

My legs felt strangely numb, but I knew that feeling was all in my head. I forced myself not to hold back, not to move sluggishly, as I got to my feet and walked the few short feet to the corner. The heat from Jacob's body flamed close behind me as he shadowed my steps.

I took one step into the bigger room and then froze, unable to force myself farther forward. Renesmee took a deep breath and then peeped out from under my hair, her little shoulders tight, expecting a rebuff.

I thought I'd prepared myself for their reaction. For accusations, for shouting, for the motionlessness of deep stress.

Tanya skittered back four steps, her strawberry curls quivering, like a human confronted by a venomous snake. Kate jumped back all the way to the front door and braced herself against the wall there. A shocked hiss came from between her clenched teeth. Eleazar threw himself in front of Carmen in a protective crouch.

"Oh please," I heard Jacob complain under his breath.

Edward put his arm around Renesmee and me. "You promised to listen," he reminded them.

“Some things cannot be heard!” Tanya exclaimed. “How could you, Edward? Do you not know what this means?”

“We have to get out of here,” Kate said anxiously, her hand on the doorknob.

“Edward . . .” Eleazar seemed beyond words.

“Wait,” Edward said, his voice harder now. “Remember what you hear, what you smell. Renesmee is not what you think she is.”

“There are no exceptions to this rule, Edward,” Tanya snapped back.

“Tanya,” Edward said sharply, “you can hear her heartbeat! Stop and think about what that means.”

“Her heartbeat?” Carmen whispered, peering around Eleazar’s shoulder.

“She’s not a full vampire child,” Edward answered, directing his attention toward Carmen’s less hostile expression. “She is half-human.”

The four vampires stared at him like he was speaking a language none of them knew.

“Hear me.” Edward’s voice shifted into a smooth velvet tone of persuasion. “Renesmee is one of a kind. I am her father. Not her creator—her biological father.”

Tanya’s head was shaking, just a tiny movement. She didn’t seem aware of it.

“Edward, you can’t expect us to—,” Eleazar started to say.

“Tell me another explanation that fits, Eleazar. You can feel the warmth of her body in the air. Blood runs in her veins, Eleazar. You can smell it.”

“How?” Kate breathed.

“Bella is her biological mother,” Edward told her. “She conceived, carried, and gave birth to Renesmee while she was still human. It nearly killed her. I was hard-pressed to get enough venom into her heart to save her.”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing,” Eleazar said. His shoulders were still stiff, his expression cold.

“Physical relationships between vampires and humans are not common,” Edward answered, a bit of dark humor in his tone now. “Human survivors of such trysts are even less common. Wouldn’t you agree, cousins?”

Both Kate and Tanya scowled at him.

“Come now, Eleazar. Surely you can see the resemblance.”

It was Carmen who responded to Edward’s words. She stepped around Eleazar, ignoring his half-articulated warning, and walked carefully to stand right in front of me. She leaned down slightly, looking carefully into Renesmee’s face.

“You seem to have your mother’s eyes,” she said in a low, calm voice, “but your father’s face.” And then, as

if she could not help herself, she smiled at Renesmee. Renesmee's answering smile was dazzling. She touched my face without looking away from Carmen. She imagined touching Carmen's face, wondering if that was okay.

"Do you mind if Renesmee tells you about it herself?" I asked Carmen. I was still too stressed to speak above a whisper. "She has a gift for explaining things."

Carmen was still smiling at Renesmee. "Do you speak, little one?"

"Yes," Renesmee answered in her trilling high soprano. All of Tanya's family flinched at the sound of her voice except for Carmen. "But I can show you more than I can tell you."

She placed her little dimpled hand on Carmen's cheek.

Carmen stiffened like an electric shock had run through her. Eleazar was at her side in an instant, his hands on her shoulders as if to yank her away.

"Wait," Carmen said breathlessly, her unblinking eyes locked on Renesmee's. Renesmee "showed" Carmen her explanation for a long time. Edward's face was intent as he watched with Carmen, and I wished so much that I could hear what he heard, too. Jacob shifted his weight impatiently behind me, and I knew he was wishing the same.

"What's Nessie showing her?" he grumbled under his breath.

“Everything,” Edward murmured.

Another minute passed, and Renesmee dropped her hand from Carmen’s face. She smiled winningly at the stunned vampire.

“She really is your daughter, isn’t she?” Carmen breathed, switching her wide topaz eyes to Edward’s face. “Such a vivid gift! It could only have come from a very gifted father.”

“Do you believe what she showed you?” Edward asked, his expression intense.

“Without a doubt,” Carmen said simply.

Eleazar’s face was rigid with distress. “Carmen!”

Carmen took his hands into her own and squeezed them. “Impossible as it seems, Edward has told you nothing but truth. Let the child show you.”

Carmen nudged Eleazar closer to me and then nodded at Renesmee. “Show him, mi querida.”

Renesmee grinned, clearly delighted with Carmen’s acceptance, and touched Eleazar lightly on the forehead.

“Ay caray!” he spit, and jerked away from her.

“What did she do to you?” Tanya demanded, coming closer warily. Kate crept forward, too.

“She’s just trying to show you her side of the story,” Carmen told him in a soothing voice.

Renesmee frowned impatiently. “Watch, please,” she commanded Eleazar. She stretched her hand out to him and then left a few inches between her fingers and his face, waiting. Eleazar eyed her suspiciously and then glanced at Carmen for help. She nodded encouragingly. Eleazar took a deep breath and then leaned closer until his forehead touched her hand again.

He shuddered when it began but held still this time, his eyes closed in concentration.

“Ahh,” he sighed when his eyes reopened a few minutes later. “I see.”

Renesmee smiled at him. He hesitated, then smiled a slightly unwilling smile in response.

“Eleazar?” Tanya asked.

“It’s all true, Tanya. This is no immortal child. She’s half-human. Come. See for yourself.”

In silence, Tanya took her turn standing warily before me, and then Kate, both showing shock as that first image hit them with Renesmee’s touch. But then, just like Carmen and Eleazar, they seemed completely won over as soon as it was done. I shot a glance at Edward’s smooth face, wondering if it could really be so easy. His golden eyes were clear, unshadowed. There was no deception in this, then.

“Thank you for listening,” he said quietly.

“But there is the grave danger you warned us of,” Tanya said. “Not directly from this child, I see, but

surely from the Volturi, then. How did they find out about her? When are they coming?"

I was not surprised at her quick understanding. After all, what could possibly be a threat to a family as strong as mine? Only the Volturi.

"When Bella saw Irina that day in the mountains," Edward explained, "she had Renesmee with her."

Kate hissed, her eyes narrowing to slits. "Irina did this? To you? To Carlisle? Irina? "

"No," Tanya whispered. "Someone else . . ."

"Alice saw her go to them," Edward said. I wondered if the others noticed the way he winced just slightly when he spoke Alice's name.

"How could she do this thing?" Eleazar asked of no one.

"Imagine if you had seen Renesmee only from a distance. If you had not waited for our explanation."

Tanya's eyes tightened. "No matter what she thought... You are our family."

"There's nothing we can do about Irina's choice now. It's too late. Alice gave us a month."

Both Tanya's and Eleazar's heads cocked to one side. Kate's brow furrowed.

"So long?" Eleazar asked.

"They are all coming. That must take some preparation."

Eleazar gasped. “The entire guard?”

“Not just the guard,” Edward said, his jaw straining tight. “Aro, Caius, Marcus. Even the wives.”

Shock glazed over all their eyes.

“Impossible,” Eleazar said blankly.

“I would have said the same two days ago,” Edward said.

Eleazar scowled, and when he spoke it was nearly a growl. “But that doesn’t make any sense. Why would they put themselves and the wives in danger?”

“It doesn’t make sense from that angle. Alice said there was more to this than just punishment for what they think we’ve done. She thought you could help us.”

“More than punishment? But what else is there?” Eleazar started pacing, stalking toward the door and back again as if he were alone here, his eyebrows furrowed as he stared at the floor.

“Where are the others, Edward? Carlisle and Alice and the rest?” Tanya asked. Edward’s hesitation was almost unnoticeable. He answered only part of her question.

“Looking for friends who might help us.”

Tanya leaned toward him, holding her hands out in front of her. “Edward, no matter how many friends you gather, we can’t help you win. We can only die with you. You must know that. Of course, perhaps

the four of us deserve that after what Irina has done now, after how we've failed you in the past—for her sake that time as well."

Edward shook his head quickly. "We're not asking you to fight and die with us, Tanya. You know Carlisle would never ask for that."

"Then what, Edward?"

"We're just looking for witnesses. If we can make them pause, just for a moment. If they would let us explain . . ." He touched Renesmee's cheek; she grabbed his hand and held it pressed against her skin. "It's difficult to doubt our story when you see it for yourself."

Tanya nodded slowly. "Do you think her past will matter to them so much?"

"Only as it foreshadows her future. The point of the restriction was to protect us from exposure, from the excesses of children who could not be tamed."

"I'm not dangerous at all," Renesmee interjected. I listened to her high, clear voice with new ears, imagining how she sounded to the others. "I never hurt Grandpa or Sue or Billy. I love humans. And wolf-people like my Jacob." She dropped Edward's hand to reach back and pat Jacob's arm.

Tanya and Kate exchanged a quick glance.

"If Irina had not come so soon," Edward mused, "we could have avoided all of this. Renesmee grows at an unprecedented rate. By the time the month is past, she'll have gained another half year of development."

“Well, that is something we can certainly witness,” Carmen said in a decided tone.

“We’ll be able to promise that we’ve seen her mature ourselves. How could the Volturi ignore such evidence?”

Eleazar mumbled, “How, indeed?” but he did not look up, and he continued pacing as if he were paying no attention at all.

“Yes, we can witness for you,” Tanya said. “Certainly that much. We will consider what more we might do.”

“Tanya,” Edward protested, hearing more in her thoughts than there was in her words,

“we don’t expect you to fight with us.”

“If the Volturi won’t pause to listen to our witness, we cannot simply stand by,” Tanya insisted. “Of course, I should only speak for myself.”

Kate snorted. “Do you really doubt me so much, sister?”

Tanya smiled widely at her. “It is a suicide mission, after all.”

Kate flashed a grin back and then shrugged nonchalantly. “I’m in.”

“I, too, will do what I can to protect the child,” Carmen agreed. Then, as if she couldn’t resist, she held her arms out toward Renesmee. “May I hold you, bebé linda?”

Renesmee reached eagerly toward Carmen, delighted with her new friend. Carmen hugged her close, murmuring to her in Spanish.

It was like it had been with Charlie, and before that with all the Cullens. Renesmee was irresistible. What was it about her that drew everyone to her, that made them willing even to pledge their lives in her defense?

For a moment I thought that maybe what we were attempting might be possible. Maybe Renesmee could do the impossible and win over our enemies as she had our friends. And then I remembered that Alice had left us, and my hope vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

# Chapter 31

## TALENTED

"What is the werewolves' part in this?" Tanya asked then, eyeing Jacob. Jacob spoke before Edward could answer. "If the Volturi won't stop to listen about Nessie, I mean Renesmee," he corrected himself, remembering that Tanya would not understand his stupid nickname, "we will stop them."

"Very brave, child, but that would be impossible for more experienced fighters than you are."

"You don't know what we can do."

Tanya shrugged. "It is your own life, certainly, to spend as you choose."

Jacob's eyes flickered to Renesmee—still in Carmen's arms with Kate hovering over them—and it was easy to read the longing in them.

"She is special, that little one," Tanya mused. "Hard to resist."

"A very talented family," Eleazar murmured as he paced. His tempo was increasing; he flashed from the door to Carmen and back again every second. "A mind reader for a father, a shield for a mother, and then whatever magic this extraordinary child has bewitched us with. I wonder if there is a name for what she does, or if it is the norm for a vampire hybrid. As if such a thing could ever be considered normal! A vampire hybrid, indeed!"

“Excuse me,” Edward said in a stunned voice. He reached out and caught Eleazar’s shoulder as he was about to turn again for the door. “What did you just call my wife?”

Eleazar looked at Edward curiously, his manic pacing forgotten for the moment. “A shield, I think. She’s blocking me now, so I can’t be sure.”

I stared at Eleazar, my brows furrowing in confusion. Shield? What did he mean about my blocking him? I was standing right here beside him, not defensive in any way.

“A shield?” Edward repeated, bewildered.

“Come now, Edward! If I can’t get a read on her, I doubt you can, either. Can you hear her thoughts right now?” Eleazar asked.

“No,” Edward murmured. “But I’ve never been able to do that. Even when she was human.”

“Never?” Eleazar blinked. “Interesting. That would indicate a rather powerful latent talent, if it was manifesting so clearly even before the transformation. I can’t feel a way through her shield to get a sense of it at all. Yet she must be raw still—she’s only a few months old.” The look he gave Edward now was almost exasperated. “And apparently completely unaware of what she’s doing. Totally unconscious. Ironic. Aro sent me all over the world searching for such anomalies, and you simply stumble across it by accident and don’t even realize what you have.” Eleazar shook his head in disbelief. I frowned. “What are you talking about? How can I be a shield? What

does that even mean?" All I could picture in my head was a ridiculous medieval suit of armor. Eleazar leaned his head to one side as he examined me. "I suppose we were overly formal about it in the guard. In truth, categorizing talents is a subjective, haphazard business; every talent is unique, never exactly the same thing twice. But you, Bella, are fairly easy to classify. Talents that are purely defensive, that protect some aspect of the bearer, are always called shields. Have you ever tested your abilities? Blocked anyone besides me and your mate?"

It took me few seconds, despite how quickly my new brain worked, to organize my answer.

"It only works with certain things," I told him. "My head is sort of... private. But it doesn't stop Jasper from being able to mess with my mood or Alice from seeing my future."

"Purely a mental defense." Eleazar nodded to himself. "Limited, but strong."

"Aro couldn't hear her," Edward interjected. "Though she was human when they met."

Eleazar's eyes widened.

"Jane tried to hurt me, but she couldn't," I said. "Edward thinks Demetri can't find me, and that Alec can't bother me, either. Is that good?"

Eleazar, still gaping, nodded. "Quite."

"A shield!" Edward said, deep satisfaction saturating his tone. "I never thought of it that way. The only one

I've ever met before was Renata, and what she did was so different."

Eleazar had recovered slightly. "Yes, no talent ever manifests in precisely the same way, because no one ever thinks in exactly the same way."

"Who's Renata? What does she do?" I asked. Renesmee was interested, too, leaning away from Carmen so that she could see around Kate.

"Renata is Aro's personal bodyguard," Eleazar told me. "A very practical kind of shield, and a very strong one."

I vaguely remembered a small crowd of vampires hovering close to Aro in his macabre tower, some male, some female. I couldn't remember the women's faces in the uncomfortable, terrifying memory. One must have been Renata.

"I wonder…," Eleazar mused. "You see, Renata is a powerful shield against a physical attack. If someone approaches her—or Aro, as she is always close beside him in a hostile situation—they find themselves… diverted. There's a force around her that repels, though it's almost unnoticeable. You simply find yourself going a different direction than you planned, with a confused memory as to why you wanted to go that other way in the first place. She can project her shield several meters out from herself. She also protects Caius and Marcus, too, when they have a need, but Aro is her priority.

"What she does isn't actually physical, though. Like the vast majority of our gifts, it takes place inside the

mind. If she tried to keep you back, I wonder who would win?"

He shook his head. "I've never heard of Aro's or Jane's gifts being thwarted."

"Momma, you're special," Renesmee told me without any surprise, like she was commenting on the color of my clothes.

I felt disoriented. Didn't I already know my gift? I had my super-self-control that had allowed me to skip right over the horrifying newborn year. Vampires only had one extra ability at most, right?

Or had Edward been correct in the beginning? Before Carlisle had suggested that my self-control could be something beyond the natural, Edward had thought my restraint was just a product of good preparation—focus and attitude, he'd declared. Which one had been right? Was there more I could do? A name and a category for what I was?

"Can you project?" Kate asked interestedly.

"Project?" I asked.

"Push it out from yourself," Kate explained. "Shield someone besides yourself."

"I don't know. I've never tried. I didn't know I should do that."

"Oh, you might not be able to," Kate said quickly. "Heavens knows I've been working on it for centuries and the best I can do is run a current over my skin."

I stared at her, mystified.

“Kate’s got an offensive skill,” Edward said. “Sort of like Jane.”

I flinched away from Kate automatically, and she laughed.

“I’m not sadistic about it,” she assured me. “It’s just something that comes in handy during a fight.”

Kate’s words were sinking in, beginning to make connections in my mind. Shield someone besides yourself, she’d said. As if there were some way for me to include another person in my strange, quirky silent head.

I remembered Edward cringing on the ancient stones of the Volturi castle turret. Though this was a human memory, it was sharper, more painful than most of the others—like it had been branded into the tissues of my brain.

What if I could stop that from happening ever again? What if I could protect him?

Protect Renesmee? What if there was even the faintest glimmer of a possibility that I could shield them, too?

“You have to teach me what to do!” I insisted, unthinkingly grabbing Kate’s arm. “You have to show me how!”

Kate winced at my grip. “Maybe—if you stop trying to crush my radius.”

“Oops! Sorry!”

"You're shielding, all right," Kate said. "That move should have about shocked your arm off. You didn't feel anything just now?"

"That wasn't really necessary, Kate. She didn't mean any harm," Edward muttered under his breath. Neither of us paid attention to him.

"No, I didn't feel anything. Were you doing your electric current thing?"

"I was. Hmm. I've never met anyone who couldn't feel it, immortal or otherwise."

"You said you project it? On your skin?"

Kate nodded. "It used to be just in my palms. Kind of like Aro."

"Or Renesmee," Edward interjected.

"But after a lot of practice, I can radiate the current all over my body. It's a good defense. Anyone who tries to touch me drops like a human that's been Tasered. It only downs him for a second, but that's long enough."

I was only half-listening to Kate, my thoughts racing around the idea that I might be able to protect my little family if I could just learn fast enough. I wished fervently that I might be good at this projecting thing, too, like I was somehow mysteriously good at all the other aspects of being a vampire. My human life had not prepared me for things that came naturally, and I couldn't make myself trust this aptitude to last. It felt like I had never wanted anything so badly before this: to be able to protect what I loved.

Because I was so preoccupied, I didn't notice the silent exchange going on between Edward and Eleazar until it became a spoken conversation.

"Can you think of even one exception, though?" Edward asked.

I looked over to make sense of his comment and realized that everyone else was already staring at the two men. They were leaning toward each other intently, Edward's expression tight with suspicion, Eleazar's unhappy and reluctant.

"I don't want to think of them that way," Eleazar said through his teeth. I was surprised at the sudden change in the atmosphere.

"If you're right—," Eleazar began again.

Edward cut him off. "The thought was yours, not mine."

"If I'm right… I can't even grasp what that would mean. It would change everything about the world we've created. It would change the meaning of my life. What I have been a part of."

"Your intentions were always the best, Eleazar."

"Would that even matter? What have I done? How many lives . . ."

Tanya put her hand on Eleazar's shoulder in a comforting gesture. "What did we miss, my friend? I want to know so that I can argue with these thoughts. You've never done anything worth castigating yourself this way."

"Oh, haven't I?" Eleazar muttered. Then he shrugged out from under her hand and began his pacing again, faster even than before.

Tanya watched him for half a second and then focused on Edward. "Explain."

Edward nodded, his tense eyes following Eleazar as he spoke. "He was trying to understand why so many of the Volturi would come to punish us. It's not the way they do things. Certainly, we are the biggest mature coven they've dealt with, but in the past other covens have joined to protect themselves, and they never presented much of a challenge despite their numbers. We are more closely bonded, and that's a factor, but not a huge one.

"He was remembering other times that covens have been punished, for one thing or the other, and a pattern occurred to him. It was a pattern that the rest of the guard would never have noticed, since Eleazar was the one passing the pertinent intelligence privately to Aro. A pattern that only repeated every other century or so."

"What was this pattern?" Carmen asked, watching Eleazar as Edward was.

"Aro does not often personally attend a punishing expedition," Edward said. "But in the past, when Aro wanted something in particular, it was never long before evidence turned up proving that this coven or that coven had committed some unpardonable crime. The ancients would decide to go along to watch the guard administer justice. And then, once the coven was all but destroyed, Aro would grant a pardon to

one member whose thoughts, he would claim, were particularly repentant. Always, it would turn out that this vampire had the gift Aro had admired. Always, this person was given a place with the guard. The gifted vampire was won over quickly, always so grateful for the honor. There were no exceptions."

"It must be a heady thing to be chosen," Kate suggested.

"Ha!" Eleazar snarled, still in motion.

"There is one among the guard," Edward said, explaining Eleazar's angry reaction. "Her name is Chelsea. She has influence over the emotional ties between people. She can both loosen and secure these ties. She could make someone feel bonded to the Volturi, to want to belong, to want to please them. . . ."

Eleazar came to an abrupt halt. "We all understood why Chelsea was important. In a fight, if we could separate allegiances between allied covens, we could defeat them that much more easily. If we could distance the innocent members of a coven emotionally from the guilty, justice could be done without unnecessary brutality—the guilty could be punished without interference, and the innocent could be spared. Otherwise, it was impossible to keep the coven from fighting as a whole. So Chelsea would break the ties that bound them together. It seemed a great kindness to me, evidence of Aro's mercy. I did suspect that Chelsea kept our own band more tightly knit, but that, too, was a good thing. It made us more effective. It helped us coexist more easily."

This clarified old memories for me. It had not made sense to me before how the guard obeyed their masters so gladly, with almost lover-like devotion.

“How strong is her gift?” Tanya asked with an edge to her voice. Her gaze quickly touched on each member of her family.

Eleazar shrugged. “I was able to leave with Carmen.” And then he shook his head. “But anything weaker than the bond between partners is in danger. In a normal coven, at least. Those are weaker bonds than those in our family, though. Abstaining from human blood makes us more civilized—lets us form true bonds of love. I doubt she could turn our allegiances, Tanya.”

Tanya nodded, seeming reassured, while Eleazar continued with his analysis.

“I could only think that the reason Aro had decided to come himself, to bring so many with him, is because his goal is not punishment but acquisition,” Eleazar said. “He needs to be there to control the situation. But he needs the entire guard for protection from such a large, gifted coven. On the other hand, that leaves the other ancients unprotected in Volterra. Too risky—someone might try to take advantage. So they all come together. How else could he be sure to preserve the gifts that he wants? He must want them very badly,” Eleazar mused.

Edward’s voice was low as a breath. “From what I saw of his thoughts last spring, Aro’s never wanted anything more than he wants Alice.”

I felt my mouth fall open, remembering the nightmarish pictures I had imagined long ago: Edward and Alice in black cloaks with bloodred eyes, their faces cold and remote as they stood close as shadows, Aro's hands on theirs…. Had Alice seen this more recently? Had she seen Chelsea trying to strip away her love for us, to bind her to Aro and Caius and Marcus?

"Is that why Alice left?" I asked, my voice breaking on her name. Edward put his hand against my cheek. "I think it must be. To keep Aro from gaining the thing he wants most of all. To keep her power out of his hands."

I heard Tanya and Kate murmuring in disturbed voices and remembered that they hadn't known about Alice.

"He wants you, too," I whispered.

Edward shrugged, his face suddenly a little too composed. "Not nearly as much. I can't really give him anything more than he already has. And of course that's dependent on his finding a way to force me to do his will. He knows me, and he knows how unlikely that is." He raised one eyebrow sardonically.

Eleazar frowned at Edward's nonchalance. "He also knows your weaknesses," Eleazar pointed out, and then he looked at me.

"It's nothing we need to discuss now," Edward said quickly.

Eleazar ignored the hint and continued. “He probably wants your mate, too, regardless. He must have been intrigued by a talent that could defy him in its human incarnation.”

Edward was uncomfortable with this topic. I didn’t like it, either. If Aro wanted me to do something—anything—all he had to do was threaten Edward and I would comply. And vice versa.

Was death the lesser concern? Was it really capture we should fear?

Edward changed the subject. “I think the Volturi were waiting for this—for some pretext. They couldn’t know what form their excuse would come in, but the plan was already in place for when it did come. That’s why Alice saw their decision before Irina triggered it. The decision was already made, just waiting for the pretense of a justification.”

“If the Volturi are abusing the trust all immortals have placed in them…,” Carmen murmured.

“Does it matter?” Eleazar asked. “Who would believe it? And even if others could be convinced that the Volturi are exploiting their power, how would it make any difference? No one can stand against them.”

“Though some of us are apparently insane enough to try,” Kate muttered. Edward shook his head. “You’re only here to witness, Kate. Whatever Aro’s goal, I don’t think he’s ready to tarnish the Volturi’s reputation for it. If we can take away his argument against us, he’ll be forced to leave us in peace.”

"Of course," Tanya murmured.

No one looked convinced. For a few long minutes, nobody said anything. Then I heard the sound of tires turning off the highway pavement onto the Cullens' dirt drive.

"Oh crap, Charlie," I muttered. "Maybe the Denalis could hang out upstairs until—"

"No," Edward said in a distant voice. His eyes were far away, staring blankly at the door. "It's not your father." His gaze focused on me. "Alice sent Peter and Charlotte, after all. Time to get ready for the next round."

# Chapter 32

## COMPANY

The Cullens' enormous house was more crowded with guests than anyone would assume could possibly be comfortable. It only worked out because none of the visitors slept. Mealtimes were dicey, though. Our company cooperated as best they could. They gave Forks and La Push a wide berth, only hunting out of state; Edward was a gracious host, lending out his cars as needed without so much as a wince. The compromise made me very uncomfortable, though I tried to tell myself that they'd all be hunting somewhere in the world, regardless.

Jacob was even more upset. The werewolves existed to prevent the loss of human life, and here was rampant murder being condoned barely outside the packs' borders. But under these circumstances, with Renesmee in acute danger, he kept his mouth shut and glared at the floor rather than the vampires.

I was amazed at the easy acceptance the visiting vampires had for Jacob; the problems Edward had anticipated had never materialized. Jacob seemed more or less invisible to them, not quite a person, but also not food, either. They treated him the way people who are not animal-lovers treat the pets of their friends.

Leah, Seth, Quil, and Embry were assigned to run with Sam for now, and Jacob would have happily joined them, except that he couldn't stand to be away from Renesmee, and Renesmee was busy fascinating

the strange collection of Carlisle's friends. We'd replayed the scene of Renesmee's introduction to the Denali coven a half dozen times. First for Peter and Charlotte, whom Alice and Jasper had sent our way without giving them any explanation at all; like most people who knew Alice, they trusted her instructions despite the lack of information. Alice had told them nothing about which direction she and Jasper were heading. She'd made no promise to ever see them again in the future.

Neither Peter nor Charlotte had ever seen an immortal child. Though they knew the rule, their negative reaction was not as powerful as the Denali vampires' had been at first. Curiosity had driven them to allow Renesmee's "explanation." And that was it. Now they were as committed to witnessing as Tanya's family.

Carlisle had sent friends from Ireland and Egypt.

The Irish clan arrived first, and they were surprisingly easy to convince. Siobhan—a woman of immense presence whose huge body was both beautiful and mesmerizing as it moved in smooth undulations—was the leader, but she and her hard-faced mate, Liam, were long used to trusting the judgment of their newest coven member. Little Maggie, with her bouncy red curls, was not physically imposing like the other two, but she had a gift for knowing when she was being lied to, and her verdicts were never contested. Maggie declared that Edward spoke the truth, and so Siobhan and Liam accepted our story absolutely before even touching Renesmee.

Amun and the other Egyptian vampires were another story. Even after two younger members of his coven, Benjamin and Tia, had been convinced by Renesmee's explanation, Amun refused to touch her and ordered his coven to leave. Benjamin—an oddly cheerful vampire who looked barely older than a boy and seemed both utterly confident and utterly careless at the same time—persuaded Amun to stay with a few subtle threats about disbanding their alliance. Amun stayed, but continued to refuse to touch Renesmee, and would not allow his mate, Kebi, to touch her, either. It seemed an unlikely grouping—though the Egyptians all looked so alike, with their midnight hair and olive-toned pallor, that they easily could have passed for a biological family. Amun was the senior member and the outspoken leader. Kebi never strayed farther away from Amun than his shadow, and I never heard her speak a single word. Tia, Benjamin's mate, was a quiet woman as well, though when she did speak there was great insight and gravity to everything she said. Still, it was Benjamin whom they all seemed to revolve around, as if he had some invisible magnetism the others depended upon for their balance. I saw Eleazar staring at the boy with wide eyes and assumed Benjamin had a talent that drew the others to him.

"It's not that," Edward told me when we were alone that night. "His gift is so singular that Amun is terrified of losing him. Much like we had planned to keep Renesmee from Aro's knowledge"—he sighed—"Amun has been keeping Benjamin from Aro's attention. Amun created Benjamin, knowing he would be special."

"What can he do?"

"Something Eleazar's never seen before. Something I've never heard of. Something that even your shield would do nothing against." He grinned his crooked smile at me. "He can actually influence the elements—earth, wind, water, and fire. True physical manipulation, no illusion of the mind. Benjamin's still experimenting with it, and Amun tries to mold him into a weapon. But you see how independent Benjamin is. He won't be used."

"You like him," I surmised from the tone of his voice.

"He has a very clear sense of right and wrong. I like his attitude."

Amun's attitude was something else, and he and Kebi kept to themselves, though Benjamin and Tia were well on their way to being fast friends with both the Denali and the Irish covens. We hoped that Carlisle's return would ease the remaining tension with Amun.

Emmett and Rose sent individuals—any nomad friends of Carlisle's that they could track down.

Garrett came first—a tall, rangy vampire with eager ruby eyes and long sandy hair he kept tied back with a leather thong—and it was apparent immediately that he was an adventurer. I imagined that we could have presented him with any challenge and he would have accepted, just to test himself. He fell in quickly with the Denali sisters, asking endless questions about their unusual lifestyle. I wondered if vegetarianism was another challenge he would try, just to see if he could do it.

Mary and Randall also came—friends already, though they did not travel together. They listened to Renesmee's story and stayed to witness like the others. Like the Denalis, they considered what they would do if the Volturi did not pause for explanations. All three of the nomads toyed with the idea of standing with us.

Of course, Jacob got more surly with each new addition. He kept his distance when he could, and when he couldn't he grumbled to Renesmee that someone was going to have to provide an index if anyone expected him to keep all the new bloodsuckers' names straight.*

Carlisle and Esme returned a week after they had gone, Emmett and Rosalie just a few days later, and all of us felt better when they were home. Carlisle brought one more friend home with him, though friend might have been the wrong term. Alistair was a misanthropic English vampire who counted Carlisle as his closest acquaintance, though he could hardly stand a visit more than once a century. Alistair very much preferred to wander alone, and Carlisle had called in a lot of favors to get him here. He shunned all company, and it was clear he didn't have any admirers in the gathered covens. The brooding dark-haired vampire took Carlisle at his word about Renesmee's origins, refusing, like Amun, to touch her. Edward told Carlisle, Esme, and me that Alistair was afraid to be here, but more afraid of not knowing the outcome. He was deeply suspicious of all authority, and therefore naturally suspicious of the Volturi.

What was happening now seemed to confirm all his fears.

“Of course, now they’ll know I was here,” we heard him grumble to himself in the attic

—his preferred spot to sulk. “No way to keep it from Aro at this point. Centuries on the run, that’s what this will mean. Everyone Carlisle’s talked to in the last decade will be on their list. I can’t believe I got myself sucked into this mess. What a fine way to treat your friends.”

But if he was right about having to run from the Volturi, at least he had more hope of doing that than the rest of us. Alistair was a tracker, though not nearly as precise and efficient as Demetri. Alistair just felt an elusive pull toward whatever he was seeking. But that pull would be enough to tell him which direction to run—the opposite direction from Demetri.

And then another pair of unexpected friends arrived—unexpected, because neither Carlisle nor Rosalie had been able to contact the Amazons.

“Carlisle,” the taller of the two very tall feline women greeted him when they arrived. Both of them seemed as if they’d been stretched—long arms and legs, long fingers, long black braids, and long faces with long noses. They wore nothing but animal skins—hide vests and tight-fitting pants that laced on the sides with leather ties. It wasn’t just their eccentric clothes that made them seem wild but everything about them, from their restless crimson eyes to their sudden, darting movements. I’d never met any vampires less civilized.

But Alice had sent them, and that was interesting news, to put it mildly. Why was Alice in South America? Just because she'd seen that no one else would be able to get in touch with the Amazons?

"Zafrina and Senna! But where's Kachiri?" Carlisle asked. "I've never seen you three apart."

"Alice told us we needed to separate," Zafrina answered in the rough, deep voice that matched her wild appearance. "It's uncomfortable to be away from each other, but Alice assured us that you needed us here, while she very much needed Kachiri somewhere else. That's all she would tell us, except that there was a great hurry... ?" Zafrina's statement trailed off into a question, and—with the tremor of nerves that never went away no matter how often I did this—I brought Renesmee out to meet them. Despite their fierce appearance, they listened very calmly to our story, and then allowed Renesmee to prove the point. They were every bit as taken with Renesmee as any of the other vampires, but I couldn't help worrying as I watched their swift, jerky movements so close beside her. Senna was always near Zafrina, never speaking, but it wasn't the same as Amun and Kebi. Kebi's manner seemed obedient; Senna and Zafrina were more like two limbs of one organism—Zafrina just happened to be the mouthpiece. The news about Alice was oddly comforting. Clearly, she was on some obscure mission of her own as she avoided whatever Aro had planned for her.

Edward was thrilled to have the Amazons with us, because Zafrina was enormously talented; her gift could make a very dangerous offensive weapon. Not

that Edward was asking for Zafrina to side with us in the battle, but if the Volturi did not pause when they saw our witnesses, perhaps they would pause for a different kind of scene.

"It's a very straightforward illusion," Edward explained when it turned out that I couldn't see anything, as usual. Zafrina was intrigued and amused by my immunity—

something she'd never encountered before—and she hovered restlessly while Edward described what I was missing. Edward's eyes unfocused slightly as he continued. "She can make most people see whatever she wants them to see—see that, and nothing else. For example, right now I would appear to be alone in the middle of a rain forest. It's so clear I might possibly believe it, except for the fact that I can still feel you in my arms."

Zafrina's lips twitched into her hard version of a smile. A second later, Edward's eyes focused again, and he grinned back.

"Impressive," he said.

Renesmee was fascinated with the conversation, and she reached out fearlessly toward Zafrina.

"Can I see?" she asked.

"What would you like to see?" Zafrina asked.

"What you showed Daddy."

Zafrina nodded, and I watched anxiously as Renesmee's eyes stared blankly into space. A second later, Renesmee's dazzling smile lit up her face.

"More," she commanded.

After that, it was hard to keep Renesmee away from Zafrina and her pretty pictures. I worried, because I was quite sure that Zafrina was able to create images that were not pretty at all. But through Renesmee's thoughts I could see Zafrina's visions for myself

—they were as clear as any of Renesmee's own memories, like they were real—and thus judge for myself whether they were appropriate or not.

Though I didn't give her up easily, I had to admit it was a good thing Zafrina was keeping Renesmee entertained. I needed my hands. I had so much to learn, both physically and mentally, and the time was so short.

My first attempt at learning to fight did not go well.

Edward had me pinned in about two seconds. But instead of letting me wrestle my way free—which I absolutely could have—he'd leaped up and away from me. I knew immediately that something was wrong; he was still as stone, staring across the meadow we were practicing in.

"I'm sorry, Bella," he said.

"No, I'm fine," I said. "Let's go again."

"I can't."

“What do you mean, you can’t? We just started.”

He didn’t answer.

“Look, I know I’m no good at this, but I can’t get better if you don’t help me.”

He said nothing. Playfully, I sprang at him. He made no defense at all, and we both fell to the ground. He was motionless as I pressed my lips to his jugular.

“I win,” I announced.

His eyes narrowed, but he said nothing.

“Edward? What’s wrong? Why won’t you teach me?”

A full minute passed before he spoke again.

“I just can’t… bear it. Emmett and Rosalie know as much as I do. Tanya and Eleazar probably know more. Ask someone else.”

“That’s not fair! You’re good at this. You helped Jasper before—you fought with him and all the others, too. Why not me? What did I do wrong?”

He sighed, exasperated. His eyes were dark, barely any gold to lighten the black.

“Looking at you that way, analyzing you as a target. Seeing all the ways I can kill you . .

.” He flinched. “It just makes it too real for me. We don’t have so much time that it will really make a difference who your teacher is. Anyone can teach you the fundamentals.”

I scowled.

He touched my pouting lower lip and smiled. "Besides, it's unnecessary. The Volturi will stop. They will be made to understand."

"But if they don't! I need to learn this."

"Find another teacher."

That was not our last conversation on the subject, but I never swayed him an inch from his decision.

Emmett was more than willing to help, though his teaching felt to me a lot like revenge for all the lost arm-wrestling matches. If I could still bruise, I would have been purple from head to toe. Rose, Tanya, and Eleazar all were patient and supportive. Their lessons reminded me of Jasper's fighting instructions to the others last June, though those memories were fuzzy and indistinct. Some of the visitors found my education entertaining, and some even offered assistance. The nomad Garrett took a few turns—he was a surprisingly good teacher; he interacted so easily with others in general that I wondered how he'd never found a coven. I even fought once with Zafrina while Renesmee watched from Jacob's arms. I learned several tricks, but I never asked for her help again. In truth, though I liked Zafrina very much and I knew she wouldn't really hurt me, the wild woman scared me to death.

I learned many things from my teachers, but I had the sense that my knowledge was still impossibly basic. I had no idea how many seconds I would last against Alec and Jane. I only prayed that it would be long enough to help.

Every minute of the day that I wasn't with Renesmee or learning to fight, I was in the backyard working with Kate, trying to push my internal shield outside of my own brain to protect someone else. Edward encouraged me in this training. I knew he hoped I would find a way of contributing that satisfied me while also keeping me out of the line of fire.

It was just so hard. There was nothing to get a hold of, nothing solid to work with. I had only my raging desire to be of use, to be able to keep Edward, Renesmee, and as much of my family as possible safe with me. Over and over I tried to force the nebulous shield outside of myself, with only faint, sporadic success. It felt like I was wrestling to stretch an invisible rubber band—a band that would change from concrete tangibility into insubstantial smoke at any random moment.

Only Edward was willing to be our guinea pig—to receive shock after shock from Kate while I grappled incompetently with the insides of my head. We worked for hours at a time, and I felt like I should be covered in sweat from the exertion, but of course my perfect body didn't betray me that way. My weariness was all mental. It killed me that it was Edward who had to suffer, my arms wrapped uselessly around him while he winced over and over from Kate's "low" setting. I tried as hard as I could to push my shield around us both; every now and then I would get it, and then it would slip away again.

I hated this practice, and I wished that Zafrina would help instead of Kate. Then all Edward would have to do was look at Zafrina's illusions until I could stop

him from seeing them. But Kate insisted that I needed better motivation—by which she meant my hatred of watching Edward's pain. I was beginning to doubt her assertion from the first day we'd met—that she wasn't sadistic about the use of her gift. She seemed to be enjoying herself to me.

"Hey," Edward said cheerfully, trying to hide any evidence of distress in his voice. Anything to keep me from fighting practice. "That one barely stung. Good job, Bella."

I took a deep breath, trying to grasp exactly what I'd done right. I tested the elastic band, struggling to force it to remain solid as I stretched it away from me.

"Again, Kate," I grunted through my clenched teeth.

Kate pressed her palm to Edward's shoulder.

He sighed in relief. "Nothing that time."

She raised an eyebrow. "That wasn't low, either."

"Good," I huffed.

"Get ready," she told me, and reached out to Edward again.

This time he shuddered, and a low breath hissed between his teeth.

"Sorry! Sorry! Sorry!" I chanted, biting my lip. Why couldn't I get this right?

"You're doing an amazing job, Bella," Edward said, pulling me tight against him.

"You've really only been working at this for a few days and you're already projecting sporadically. Kate, tell her how well she's doing."

Kate pursed her lips. "I don't know. She's obviously got tremendous ability, and we're only beginning to touch it. She can do better, I'm sure. She's just lacking incentive."

I stared at her in disbelief, my lips automatically curling back from my teeth. How could she think I lacked motivation with her shocking Edward right here in front of me?

I heard murmurs from the audience that had grown steadily as I practiced—only Eleazar, Carmen, and Tanya at first, but then Garrett had wandered over, then Benjamin and Tia, Siobhan and Maggie, and now even Alistair was peering down from a window on the third story. The spectators agreed with Edward; they thought I was already doing well.

"Kate...," Edward said in a warning voice as some new course of action occurred to her, but she was already in motion. She darted along the curve of the river to where Zafrina, Senna, and Renesmee were walking slowly, Renesmee's hand in Zafrina's as they traded pictures back and forth. Jacob shadowed them from a few feet behind.

"Nessie," Kate said—the newcomers had quickly picked up the irritating nickname,

"would you like to come help your mother?"

"No," I half-snarled.

Edward hugged me reassuringly. I shook him off just as Renesmee flitted across the yard to me, with Kate, Zafrina, and Senna right behind her.

“Absolutely not, Kate,” I hissed.

Renesmee reached for me, and I opened my arms automatically. She curled into me, pressing her head into the hollow beneath my shoulder.

“But Momma, I want to help,” she said in a determined voice. Her hand rested against my neck, reinforcing her desire with images of the two of us together, a team.

“No,” I said, quickly backing away. Kate had taken a deliberate step in my direction, her hand stretched toward us.

“Stay away from us, Kate,” I warned her.

“No.” She began stalking forward. She smiled like a hunter cornering her prey. I shifted Renesmee so that she was clinging to my back, still backing away at a pace that matched Kate’s. Now my hands were free, and if Kate wanted to keep her hands attached to her wrists, she’d better keep her distance.

Kate probably didn’t understand, never having known for herself the passion of a mother for her child. She must not have realized just how far past too far she’d already gone. I was so furious that my vision took on a strange reddish tint, and my tongue tasted like burning metal. The strength I usually worked to keep restrained flowed through my muscles, and I knew I

could crush her into diamond-hard rubble if she pushed me to it.

The rage brought every aspect of my being into sharper focus. I could even feel the elasticity of my shield more exactly now—feel that it was not a band so much as a layer, a thin film that covered me from head to toe. With the anger rippling through my body, I had a better sense of it, a tighter hold on it. I stretched it around myself, out from myself, swaddling Renesmee completely inside it, just in case Kate got past my guard. Kate took another calculated step forward, and a vicious snarl ripped up my throat and through my clenched teeth.

"Be careful, Kate," Edward cautioned.

Kate took another step, and then made a mistake even someone as inexpert as I could recognize. Just a short leap away from me, she looked away, turning her attention from me to Edward.

Renesmee was secure on my back; I coiled to spring.

"Can you hear anything from Nessie?" Kate asked him, her voice calm and easy. Edward darted into the space between us, blocking my line to Kate.

"No, nothing at all," he answered. "Now give Bella some space to calm down, Kate. You shouldn't goad her like that. I know she doesn't seem her age, but she's only a few months old."

"We don't have time to do this gently, Edward. We're going to have to push her. We only have a few weeks, and she's got the potential to—"

“Back off for a minute, Kate.”

Kate frowned but took Edward’s warning more seriously than she’d taken mine. Renesmee’s hand was on my neck; she was remembering Kate’s attack, showing me that no harm was meant, that Daddy was in on it.…

This did not pacify me. The spectrum of light I saw still seemed tainted with crimson. But I was in better control of myself, and I could see the wisdom of Kate’s words. The anger helped me. I would learn faster under pressure.

That didn’t mean I liked it.

“Kate,” I growled. I rested my hand on the small of Edward’s back. I could still feel my shield like a strong, flexible sheet around Renesmee and me. I pushed it farther, forcing it around Edward. There was no sign of a flaw in the stretchy fabric, no threat of a tear. I panted with the effort, and my words came out sounding breathless rather than furious.

“Again,” I said to Kate. “Edward only.”

She rolled her eyes but flitted forward and pressed her palm to Edward’s shoulder.

“Nothing,” Edward said. I heard the smile in his voice.

“And now?” Kate asked.

“Still nothing.”

“And now?” This time, there was the sound of strain in her voice.

"Nothing at all."

Kate grunted and stepped away.

"Can you see this?" Zafrina asked in her deep, wild voice, staring intently at the three of us. Her English was strangely accented, her words pulling up in unexpected places.

"I don't see anything I shouldn't," Edward said.

"And you, Renesmee?" Zafrina asked.

Renesmee smiled at Zafrina and shook her head.

My fury had almost entirely ebbed, and I clenched my teeth together, panting faster as I pushed out against the elastic shield; it felt like it was getting heavier the longer I held it. It pulled back, dragging inward.

"No one panic," Zafrina warned the little group watching me. "I want to see how far she can extend."

There was a shocked gasp from everyone there—Eleazar, Carmen, Tanya, Garrett, Benjamin, Tia, Siobhan, Maggie—everyone but Senna, who seemed prepared for whatever Zafrina was doing. The others' eyes were blank, their expressions anxious.

"Raise your hand when you get your sight back," Zafrina instructed. "Now, Bella. See how many you can shield."

My breath came out in a huff. Kate was the closest person to me besides Edward and Renesmee, but even she was about ten feet away. I locked my jaw and shoved, trying to heave the resisting, resilient

safeguard farther from myself. Inch by inch I drove it toward Kate, fighting the reaction that fought back with every fraction that I gained. I only watched Kate's anxious expression while I worked, and I groaned quietly with relief when her eyes blinked and focused. She raised her hand.

"Fascinating!" Edward murmured under his breath. "It's like one-way glass. I can read everything they're thinking, but they can't reach me behind it. And I can hear Renesmee, though I couldn't when I was on the outside. I'll bet Kate could shock me now, because she's underneath the umbrella. I still can't hear you… hmmm. How does that work? I wonder if . . ."

He continued to mumble to himself, but I couldn't listen to the words. I ground my teeth together, struggling to force the shield out to Garrett, who was closest to Kate. His hand came up.

"Very good," Zafrina complimented me. "Now—"

But she'd spoken too soon; with a sharp gasp, I felt my shield recoil like a rubber band stretched too far, snapping back into its original shape. Renesmee, experiencing for the first time the blindness Zafrina had conjured for the others, trembled against my back. Wearily, I fought back against the elastic pull, forcing the shield to include her again.

"Can I have a minute?" I panted. Since I'd become a vampire, I hadn't felt the need to rest even once before this moment. It was unnerving to feel so drained and yet so strong at the same time.

“Of course,” Zafrina said, and the spectators relaxed as she let them see again.

“Kate,” Garrett called as the others murmured and drifted slightly away, disturbed by the moment of blindness; vampires were not used to feeling vulnerable. The tall, sandyhaired Garrett was the only non-gifted immortal who seemed drawn to my practice sessions. I wondered what the lure was for the adventurer.

“I wouldn’t, Garrett,” Edward cautioned.

Garrett continued toward Kate despite the warning, his lips pursed in speculation. “They say you can put a vampire flat on his back.”

“Yes,” she agreed. Then, with a sly smile, she wiggled her fingers playfully at him.

“Curious?”

Garrett shrugged. “That’s something I’ve never seen. Seems like it might be a bit of an exaggeration. . . .”

“Maybe,” Kate said, her face suddenly serious. “Maybe it only works on the weak or the young. I’m not sure. You look strong, though. Perhaps you could withstand my gift.”

She stretched her hand out to him, palm up—a clear invitation. Her lips twitched, and I was pretty sure her grave expression was an attempt to hustle him. Garrett grinned at the challenge. Very confidently, he touched her palm with his index finger.

And then, with a loud gasp, his knees buckled and he keeled over backward. His head hit a piece of granite with a sharp cracking noise. It was shocking to watch. My instincts recoiled against seeing an immortal incapacitated that way; it was profoundly wrong.

“I told you so,” Edward muttered.

Garrett’s eyelids trembled for a few seconds, and then his eyes opened wide. He stared up at the smirking Kate, and a wondering smile lit his face.

“Wow,” he said.

“Did you enjoy that?” she asked skeptically.

“I’m not crazy,” he laughed, shaking his head as he got slowly to his knees, “but that was sure something!”

“That’s what I hear.”

Edward rolled his eyes.

And then there was a low commotion from the front yard. I heard Carlisle speaking over a babble of surprised voices.

“Did Alice send you?” he asked someone, his voice unsure, slightly upset. Another unexpected guest?

Edward darted into the house and most of the others imitated him. I followed more slowly, Renesmee still perched on my back. I would give Carlisle a moment. Let him warm up the new guest, prepare him or her or them for the idea of what was coming. I pulled

Renesmee into my arms as I walked cautiously around the house to enter through the kitchen door, listening to what I couldn't see.

"No one sent us," a deep whispery voice answered Carlisle's question. I was immediately reminded of the ancient voices of Aro and Caius, and I froze just inside the kitchen.

I knew the front room was crowded—almost everyone had gone in to see the newest visitors—but there was barely any noise. Shallow breathing, that was all. Carlisle's voice was wary as he responded. "Then what brings you here now?"

"Word travels," a different voice answered, just as feathery as the first. "We heard hints that Volturi were moving against you. There were whispers that you would not stand alone. Obviously, the whispers were true. This is an impressive gathering."

"We are not challenging the Volturi," Carlisle answered in a strained tone. "There has been a misunderstanding, that is all. A very serious misunderstanding, to be sure, but one we're hoping to clear up. What you see are witnesses. We just need the Volturi to listen. We didn't—"

"We don't care what they say you did," the first voice interrupted. "And we don't care if you broke the law."

"No matter how egregiously," the second inserted.

"We've been waiting a millennium and a half for the Italian scum to be challenged,"

said the first. “If there is any chance they will fall, we will be here to see it.”

“Or even to help defeat them,” the second added. They spoke in a smooth tandem, their voices so similar that less sensitive ears would assume there was only one speaker. “If we think you have a chance of success.”

“Bella?” Edward called to me in a hard voice. “Bring Renesmee here, please. Maybe we should test our Romanian visitors’ claims.”

It helped to know that probably half of the vampires in the other room would come to Renesmee’s defense if these Romanians were upset by her. I didn’t like the sound of their voices, or the dark menace in their words. As I walked into the room, I could see that I was not alone in that assessment. Most of the motionless vampires glared with hostile eyes, and a few—Carmen, Tanya, Zafrina, and Senna—repositioned themselves subtly into defensive poses between the newcomers and Renesmee. The vampires at the door were both slight and short, one dark-haired and the other with hair so ashy blond that it looked pale gray. They had the same powdery look to their skin as the Volturi, though I thought it was not so pronounced. I couldn’t be sure about that, as I had never seen the Volturi except with human eyes; I could not make a perfect comparison. Their sharp, narrow eyes were dark burgundy, with no milky film. They wore very simple black clothes that could pass as modern but hinted at older designs. The dark one grinned when I came into view. “Well, well, Carlisle. You have been naughty, haven’t you?”

"She's not what you think, Stefan."

"And we don't care either way," the blonde responded. "As we said before."

"Then you're welcome to observe, Vladimir, but it is definitely not our plan to challenge the Volturi, as we said before."

"Then we'll just cross our fingers," Stefan began.

"And hope we get lucky," finished Vladimir.

In the end, we had pulled together seventeen witnesses—the Irish, Siobhan, Liam, and Maggie; the Egyptians, Amun, Kebi, Benjamin, and Tia; the Amazons, Zafrina and Senna; the Romanians, Vladimir and Stefan; and the nomads, Charlotte and Peter, Garrett, Alistair, Mary, and Randall—to supplement our family of eleven. Tanya, Kate, Eleazar, and Carmen insisted on being counted as part of our family. Aside from the Volturi, it was probably the largest friendly gathering of mature vampires in immortal history.

We all were beginning to be a little bit hopeful. Even I couldn't help it. Renesmee had won over so many in such a brief time. The Volturi only had to listen for just the tiniest second. . . .

The last two surviving Romanians—focused only on their bitter resentment of the ones who had overthrown their empire fifteen hundred years earlier—took everything in stride. They would not touch Renesmee, but they showed no aversion to her. They seemed mysteriously delighted by our alliance

with the werewolves. They watched me practice my shield with Zafrina and Kate, watched Edward answer unspoken questions, watched Benjamin pull geysers of water from the river or sharp gusts of wind from the still air with just his mind, and their eyes glowed with their fierce hope that the Volturi had finally met their match.

We did not hope for the same things, but we all hoped.

# Chapter 33

## FORGERY

“Charlie, we’ve still got that strictly need-to-know company situation going. I know it’s been more than a week since you saw Renesmee, but a visit is just not a good idea right now. How about I bring Renesmee over to see you?”

Charlie was quiet for so long that I wondered if he heard the strain beneath my façade. But then he muttered, “Need to know, ugh,” and I realized it was just his wariness of the supernatural that made him slow to respond.

“Okay, kid,” Charlie said. “Can you bring her over this morning? Sue’s bringing me lunch. She’s just as horrified by my cooking as you were when you first showed up.”

Charlie laughed and then sighed for the old days.

“This morning will be perfect.” The sooner the better. I’d already put this off too long.

“Is Jake coming with you guys?”

Though Charlie didn’t know anything about werewolf imprinting, no one could be oblivious to the attachment between Jacob and Renesmee.

“Probably.” There was no way Jacob would voluntarily miss an afternoon with Renesmee sans bloodsuckers.

“Maybe I should invite Billy, too,” Charlie mused. “But… hmm. Maybe another time.”

I was only half paying attention to Charlie—enough to notice the strange reluctance in his voice when he spoke of Billy, but not enough to worry what that was about. Charlie and Billy were grown-ups; if there was something going on between them, they could figure it out for themselves. I had too many more important things to obsess over.

“See you in a few,” I told him, and hung up.

This trip was about more than protecting my father from the twenty-seven oddly matched vampires—who all had sworn not to kill anyone in a three-hundred-mile radius, but still… Obviously, no human being should get anywhere near this group. This was the excuse I’d given Edward: I was taking Renesmee to Charlie so that he wouldn’t decide to come here. It was a good reason for leaving the house, but not my real reason at all.

“Why can’t we take your Ferrari?” Jacob complained when he met me in the garage. I was already in Edward’s Volvo with Renesmee.

Edward had gotten around to revealing my after car; as he’d suspected, I had not been capable of showing the appropriate enthusiasm. Sure, it was pretty and fast, but I liked to run.

“Too conspicuous,” I answered. “We could go on foot, but that would freak Charlie out.”

Jacob grumbled but got into the front seat. Renesmee climbed from my lap to his.

“How are you?” I asked him as I pulled out of the garage.

“How do you think?” Jacob asked bitingly. “I’m sick of all these reeking bloodsuckers.”

He saw my expression and spoke before I could answer. “Yeah, I know, I know. They’re the good guys, they’re here to help, they’re going to save us all. Etcetera, etcetera. Say what you want, I still think Dracula One and Dracula Two are creep-tacular.”

I had to smile. The Romanians weren’t my favorite guests, either. “I don’t disagree with you there.”

Renesmee shook her head but said nothing; unlike the rest of us, she found the Romanians strangely fascinating. She’d made the effort to speak to them aloud since they would not let her touch them. Her question was about their unusual skin and, though I was afraid they might be offended, I was kind of glad she’d asked. I was curious, too.

They hadn’t seemed upset by her interest. Maybe a little rueful.

“We sat still for a very long time, child,” Vladimir had answered, with Stefan nodding along but not continuing Vladimir’s sentences as he often did. “Contemplating our own divinity. It was a sign of our power that everything came to us. Prey, diplomats, those seeking our favor. We sat on our thrones and thought ourselves gods. We didn’t notice for a long

time that we were changing—almost petrifying. I suppose the Volturi did us one favor when they burned our castles. Stefan and I, at least, did not continue to petrify. Now the Volturi's eyes are filmed with dusty scum, but ours are bright. I imagine that will give us an advantage when we gouge theirs from their sockets."

I tried to keep Renesmee away from them after that.

"How long do we get to hang out with Charlie?" Jacob asked, interrupting my thoughts. He was visibly relaxing as we pulled away from the house and all its new inmates. It made me happy that I didn't really count as a vampire to him. I was still just Bella.

"For quite a while, actually."

The tone of my voice caught his attention.

"Is something going on here besides visiting your dad?"

"Jake, you know how you're pretty good at controlling your thoughts around Edward?"

He raised one thick black brow. "Yeah?"

I just nodded, cutting my eyes to Renesmee. She was looking out the window, and I couldn't tell how interested she was in our conversation, but I decided not to risk going any further.

Jacob waited for me to add something else, and then his lower lip pushed out while he thought about what little I'd said.

As we drove in silence, I squinted through the annoying contacts into the cold rain; it wasn't quite cold enough for snow. My eyes were not as ghoulish as they had been in the beginning—definitely closer to a dull reddish orange than to bright crimson. Soon they'd be amber enough for me to quit the contacts. I hoped the change wouldn't upset Charlie too much.

Jacob was still chewing over our truncated conversation when we got to Charlie's. We didn't talk as we walked at a quick human pace through the falling rain. My dad was waiting for us; he had the door open before I could knock.

"Hey, guys! It seems like it's been years! Look at you, Nessie! Come to Grampa! I swear you've grown half a foot. And you look skinny, Ness." He glared at me. "Aren't they feeding you up there?"

"It's just the growth spurt," I muttered. "Hey, Sue," I called over his shoulder. The smell of chicken, tomato, garlic, and cheese issued from the kitchen; it probably smelled good to everyone else. I could also smell fresh pine and packing dust. Renesmee flashed her dimples. She never spoke in front of Charlie.

"Well, come on in out of the cold, kids. Where's my son-in-law?"

"Entertaining friends," Jacob said, and then snorted. "You're so lucky you're out of the loop, Charlie. That's all I'm going to say."

I punched Jacob lightly in the kidney while Charlie cringed.

“Ow,” Jacob complained under his breath; well, I’d thought I’d punched lightly.

“Actually, Charlie, I have some errands to run.”

Jacob shot a glance at me but said nothing.

“Behind on your Christmas shopping, Bells? You only have a few days, you know.”

“Yeah, Christmas shopping,” I said lamely. That explained the packing dust. Charlie must have put the old decorations up.

“Don’t worry, Nessie,” he whispered in her ear. “I got you covered if your mom drops the ball.”

I rolled my eyes at him, but in truth, I hadn’t thought about the holidays at all.

“Lunch’s on the table,” Sue called from the kitchen. “C’mon, guys.”

“See you later, Dad,” I said, and exchanged a quick look with Jacob. Even if he couldn’t help but think about this near Edward, at least there wasn’t much for him to share. He had no idea what I was up to.

Of course, I thought to myself as I got into the car, it wasn’t like I had much idea, either. The roads were slick and dark, but driving didn’t intimidate me anymore. My reflexes were well up to the job, and I barely paid attention to the road. The problem was keeping my speed from attracting attention when I had company. I wanted to be done with today’s mission, to have the mystery sorted out so that I could get back to the vital task of learning. Learning

to protect some, learning to kill others. I was getting better and better with my shield. Kate didn't feel the need to motivate me anymore—it wasn't hard to find reasons to feel angry, now that I knew that was the key

—and so I mostly worked with Zafrina. She was pleased with my extension; I was able to cover almost a ten-foot area for more than a minute, though it exhausted me. This morning she'd been trying to find out if I could push the shield away from my mind altogether. I didn't see what the use of that would be, but Zafrina thought it would help strengthen me, like exercising muscles in the stomach and back rather than just the arms. Eventually, you could lift more weight when all the muscles were stronger. I wasn't very good at it. I had only gotten one glimpse of the jungle river she was trying to show me.

But there were different ways to prepare for what was coming, and with only two weeks left, I worried that I might be neglecting the most important. Today I would rectify that oversight.

I'd memorized the appropriate maps, and I had no problem finding my way to the address that didn't exist online, the one for J. Jenks. My next step would be Jason Jenks at the other address, the one Alice had not given me.

To say that it wasn't a nice neighborhood would be an understatement. The most nondescript of all the Cullens' cars was still outrageous on this street. My old Chevy would have looked healthy here. During my human years, I would have locked the doors and

driven away as fast as I dared. As it was, I was a little fascinated. I tried to imagine Alice in this place for any reason, and failed.

The buildings—all three stories, all narrow, all leaning slightly as if bowed by the pounding rain—were mostly old houses divided up into multiple apartments. It was hard to tell what color the peeling paint was supposed to be. Everything had faded to shades of gray. A few of the buildings had businesses on the first floor: a dirty bar with the windows painted black, a psychic's supply store with neon hands and tarot cards glowing fitfully on the door, a tattoo parlor, and a daycare with duct tape holding the broken front window together. There were no lamps on inside any of the rooms, though it was grim enough outside that the humans should have needed the light. I could hear the low mumbling of voices in the distance; it sounded like TV. There were a few people about, two shuffling through the rain in opposite directions and one sitting on the shallow porch of a boarded-up cut-rate law office, reading a wet newspaper and whistling. The sound was much too cheerful for the setting. I was so bemused by the carefree whistler, I didn't realize at first that the abandoned building was right where the address I was looking for should exist. There were no numbers on the dilapidated place, but the tattoo parlor beside it was just two numbers off.

I pulled up to the curb and idled for a second. I was getting into that dump one way or another, but how to do so without the whistler noticing me? I could park the next street over and come through the

back.… There might be more witnesses on that side. Maybe the rooftops? Was it dark enough for that kind of thing?

“Hey, lady,” the whistler called to me.

I rolled the passenger window down as if I couldn’t hear him.

The man laid his paper aside, and his clothes surprised me, now that I could see them. Under his long ragged duster, he was a little too well dressed. There was no breeze to give me the scent, but the sheen on his dark red shirt looked like silk. His crinkly black hair was tangled and wild, but his dark skin was smooth and perfect, his teeth white and straight. A contradiction.

“Maybe you shouldn’t park that car there, lady,” he said. “It might not be here when you get back.”

“Thanks for the warning,” I said.

I shut off the engine and got out. Perhaps my whistling friend could give me the answers I needed faster than breaking and entering. I opened my big gray umbrella—

not that I cared, really, about protecting the long cashmere sweater-dress I wore. It was what a human would do.

The man squinted through the rain at my face, and then his eyes widened. He swallowed, and I heard his heart accelerate as I approached.

“I’m looking for someone,” I began.

"I'm someone," he offered with a smile. "What can I do for you, beautiful?"

"Are you J. Jenks?" I asked.

"Oh," he said, and his expression changed from anticipation to understanding. He got to his feet and examined me with narrowed eyes. "Why're you looking for J?"

"That's my business." Besides, I didn't have a clue. "Are you J?"

"No."

We faced each other for a long moment while his sharp eyes ran up and down the fitted pearl gray sheath I wore. His gaze finally made it to my face. "You don't look like the usual customer."

"I'm probably not the usual," I admitted. "But I do need to see him as soon as possible."

"I'm not sure what to do," he admitted.

"Why don't you tell me your name?"

He grinned. "Max."

"Nice to meet you, Max. Now, why don't you tell me what you do for the usual?"

His grin became a frown. "Well, J's usual clients don't look a thing like you. Your kind doesn't bother with the downtown office. You just go straight up to his fancy office in the skyscraper."

I repeated the other address I had, making the list of numbers a question.

“Yeah, that’s the place,” he said, suspicious again. “How come you didn’t go there?”

“This was the address I was given—by a very dependable source.”

“If you were up to any good, you wouldn’t be here.”

I pursed my lips. I’d never been much good at bluffing, but Alice hadn’t left me a lot of alternatives. “Maybe I’m not up to any good.”

Max’s face turned apologetic. “Look, lady—”

“Bella.”

“Right. Bella. See, I need this job. J pays me pretty good to mostly just hang out here all day. I want to help you, I do, but—and of course I’m speaking hypothetically, right? Or off the record, or whatever works for you—but if I pass somebody through that could get him in trouble, I’m out of work. Do you see my problem?”

I thought for a minute, chewing on my lip. “You’ve never seen anyone like me here before? Well, sort of like me. My sister is a lot shorter than me, and she has dark spiky black hair.”

“J knows your sister?”

“I think so.”

Max pondered this for a moment. I smiled at him, and his breathing stuttered. “Tell you what I’ll do. I’ll give

J a call and describe you to him. Let him make the decision."

What did J. Jenks know? Would my description mean something to him? That was a troubling thought.

"My last name is Cullen," I told Max, wondering if that was too much information. I was starting to get irritated with Alice. Did I really have to be quite this blind? She could have given me one or two more words....

"Cullen, got it."

I watched as he dialed, easily picking out the number. Well, I could call J. Jenks myself if this didn't work.

"Hey J, it's Max. I know I'm never supposed to call you at this number except in an emergency. . . ."

Is there an emergency? I heard faintly from the other end.

"Well, not exactly. It's this girl who wants to see you. . . ."

I fail to see the emergency in that. Why didn't you follow normal procedure?

"I didn't follow normal procedure 'cause she don't look like any kind of normal—"

Is she a badge?!

"No—"

You can't be sure about that. Does she look like one of Kubarev's—?

"No—let me talk, okay? She says you know her sister or something."

Not likely. What does she look like?

"She looks like . . ." His eyes ran from my face to my shoes appreciatively. "Well, she looks like a freaking supermodel, that's what she looks like." I smiled and he winked at me, then went on. "Rocking body, pale as a sheet, dark brown hair almost to her waist, needs a good night's sleep—any of this sounding familiar?"

No, it doesn't. I'm not happy that you let your weakness for pretty women interrupt—

"Yeah, so I'm a sucker for the pretty ones, what's wrong with that? I'm sorry I bothered you, man. Just forget it."

"Name," I whispered.

"Oh right. Wait," Max said. "She says her name is Bella Cullen. That help?"

There was a beat of dead silence, and then the voice on the other end was abruptly screaming, using a lot of words you didn't often hear outside of truck stops. Max's whole expression changed; all the joking vanished and his lips went pale.

"Because you didn't ask!" Max yelled back, panicked.

There was another pause while J collected himself.

Beautiful and pale? J asked, a tiny bit calmer.

"I said that, didn't I?"

Beautiful and pale? What did this man know about vampires? Was he one of us himself?

I wasn't prepared for that kind of confrontation. I gritted my teeth. What had Alice gotten me into?

Max waited for a minute through another volley of shouted insults and instructions and then glanced at me with eyes that were almost frightened. "But you only meet downtown clients on Thursdays—okay, okay! On it." He slid his phone shut.

"He wants to see me?" I asked brightly.

Max glowered. "You could have told me you were a priority client."

"I didn't know I was."

"I thought you might be a cop," he admitted. "I mean, you don't look like a cop. But you act kind of weird, beautiful."

I shrugged.

"Drug cartel?" he guessed.

"Who, me?" I asked.

"Yeah. Or your boyfriend or whatever."

"Nope, sorry. I'm not really a fan of drugs, and neither is my husband. Just say no and all that."

Max cussed under his breath. "Married. Can't catch a break."

I smiled.

"Mafia?"

"Nope."

"Diamond smuggling?"

"Please! Is that the kind of people you usually deal with, Max? Maybe you need a new job."

I had to admit, I was enjoying myself a little. I hadn't interacted with humans much besides Charlie and Sue. It was entertaining to watch him flounder. I was also pleased at how easy it was not to kill him.

"You've got to be involved in something big. And bad," he mused.

"It's not really like that."

"That's what they all say. But who else needs papers? Or can afford to pay J's prices for them, I should say. None of my business, anyway," he said, and then muttered the word married again.

He gave me an entirely new address with basic directions, and then watched me drive away with suspicious, regretful eyes.

At this point, I was ready for almost anything—some kind of James Bond villain's hightech lair seemed appropriate. So I thought Max must have given me the wrong address as a test. Or maybe the lair was subterranean, underneath this very commonplace strip mall nestled up against a wooded hill in a nice family neighborhood. I pulled into an open spot and looked up at a tastefully subtle sign that read JASON

SCOTT, ATTORNEY AT LAW.

The office inside was beige with celery green accents, inoffensive and unremarkable. There was no scent of vampire here, and that helped me relax. Nothing but unfamiliar human. A fish tank was set into the wall, and a blandly pretty blond receptionist sat behind the desk.

“Hello,” she greeted me. “How can I help you?”

“I’m here to see Mr. Scott.”

“Do you have an appointment?”

“Not exactly.”

She smirked a little. “It could be a while, then. Why don’t you have a seat while I—”

April! a man’s demanding voice squawked from the phone on her desk. I’m expecting a Ms. Cullen shortly.

I smiled and pointed to myself.

Send her in immediately. Do you understand? I don’t care what it’s interrupting. I could hear something else in his voice besides impatience. Stress. Nerves.

“She’s just arrived,” April said as soon as she could speak.

What? Send her in! What are you waiting for?

“Right away, Mr. Scott!” She got to her feet, fluttering her hands as she led the way down a short hallway,

offering me coffee or tea or anything else I might have wanted.

“Here you are,” she said as she ushered me through the door into a power office, complete with heavy wooden desk and vanity wall.

“Close the door behind you,” a raspy tenor voice ordered.

I examined the man behind the desk while April made a hasty retreat. He was short and balding, probably around fifty-five, with a paunch. He wore a red silk tie with a blueand-white-striped shirt, and his navy blazer hung over the back of his chair. He was also trembling, blanched to a sickly paste color, with sweat beading on his forehead; I imagined an ulcer churning away under the spare tire.

J recovered himself and rose unsteadily from his chair. He reached his hand across the desk.

“Ms. Cullen. What an absolute delight.”

I crossed to him and shook his hand quickly once. He cringed slightly at my cold skin but did not seem particularly surprised by it.

“Mr. Jenks. Or do you prefer Scott?”

He winced again. “Whatever you wish, of course.”

“How about you call me Bella, and I’ll call you J?”

“Like old friends,” he agreed, mopping a silk handkerchief across his forehead. He gestured for me

to have a seat and took his own. “I must ask, am I finally meeting Mr. Jasper’s lovely wife?”

I weighed that for a second. So this man knew Jasper, not Alice. Knew him, and seemed afraid of him, too. “His sister-in-law, actually.”

He pursed his lips, as if he were grasping for meanings just as desperately as I was.

“I trust Mr. Jasper is in good health?” he asked carefully.

“I’m sure he is in excellent health. He’s on an extended vacation at the moment.”

This seemed to clear up some of J’s confusion. He nodded to himself and templed his fingers. “Just so. You should have come to the main office. My assistants there would have put you straight through to me—no need to go through less hospitable channels.”

I just nodded. I wasn’t sure why Alice had given me the ghetto address.

“Ah, well, you’re here now. What can I do for you?”

“Papers,” I said, trying to make my voice sound like I knew what I was talking about.

“Certainly,” J agreed at once. “Are we talking birth certificates, death certificates, drivers’ licenses, passports, social security cards… ?”

I took a deep breath and smiled. I owed Max big time.

And then my smile faded. Alice had sent me here for a reason, and I was sure it was to protect Renesmee. Her last gift to me. The one thing she would know I needed. The only reason Renesmee would need a forger was if she was running. And the only reason Renesmee would be running was if we had lost.

If Edward and I were running with her, she wouldn't need these documents right away. I was sure IDs were something Edward knew how to get his hands on or make himself, and I was sure he knew ways to escape without them. We could run with her for thousands of miles. We could swim with her across an ocean.

If we were around to save her.

And all the secrecy to keep this out of Edward's head. Because there was a good chance that everything he knew, Aro would know. If we lost, Aro would certainly get the information he craved before he destroyed Edward.

It was as I had suspected. We couldn't win. But we must have a good shot at killing Demetri before we lost, giving Renesmee the chance to run.

My still heart felt like a boulder in my chest—a crushing weight. All my hope faded like fog in the sunshine. My eyes pricked.

Who would I put this on? Charlie? But he was so defenselessly human. And how would I get Renesmee to him? He was not going to be anywhere close to that fight. So that left one person. There really had never been anyone else.

I'd thought this through so quickly that J didn't notice my pause.

"Two birth certificates, two passports, one driver's license," I said in a low, strained tone.

If he noticed the change in my expression, he pretended otherwise.

"The names?"

"Jacob… Wolfe. And… Vanessa Wolfe." Nessie seemed like an okay nickname for Vanessa. Jacob would get a kick out of the Wolfe thing.

His pen scratched swiftly across a legal pad. "Middle names?"

"Just put something generic in."

"If you prefer. Ages?"

"Twenty-seven for the man, five for the girl." Jacob could pull it off. He was a beast. And at the rate Renesmee was growing, I'd better estimate high. He could be her stepfather….

"I'll need pictures if you prefer finished documents," J said, interrupting my thoughts.

"Mr. Jasper usually liked to finish them himself."

Well, that explained why J didn't know what Alice looked like.

"Hold on," I said.

This was luck. I had several family pictures shoved in my wallet, and the perfect one—

Jacob holding Renesmee on the front porch steps—was only a month old. Alice had given it to me just a few days before… Oh. Maybe there wasn't that much luck involved after all. Alice knew I had this picture. Maybe she'd even had some dim flash that I would need it before she gave it to me.

"Here you go."

J examined the picture for a moment. "Your daughter is very like you."

I tensed. "She's more like her father."

"Who is not this man." He touched Jacob's face.

My eyes narrowed, and new sweat beads popped out on J's shiny head.

"No. That is a very close friend of the family."

"Forgive me," he mumbled, and the pen began scratching again. "How soon will you need the documents?"

"Can I get them in a week?"

"That's a rush order. It will cost twice as—but forgive me. I forgot with whom I was speaking."

Clearly, he knew Jasper.

"Just give me a number."

He seemed hesitant to say it aloud, though I was sure, having dealt with Jasper, he must have known that price wasn't really an object. Not even taking into consideration the bloated accounts that existed all

over the world with the Cullens' various names on them, there was enough cash stashed all over the house to keep a small country afloat for a decade; it reminded me of the way there were always a hundred fishhooks in the back of any drawer at Charlie's house. I doubted anyone would even notice the small stack I'd removed in preparation for today.

J wrote the price down on the bottom of the legal pad.

I nodded calmly. I had more than that with me. I unclasped my bag again and counted out the right amount—I had it all paper-clipped into five-thousand-dollar increments, so it took no time at all.

"There."

"Ah, Bella, you don't really have to give me the entire sum now. It's customary for you to save half to ensure delivery."

I smiled wanly at the nervous man. "But I trust you, J. Besides, I'll give you a bonus—

the same again when I get the documents."

"That's not necessary, I assure you."

"Don't worry about it." It wasn't like I could take it with me. "So I'll meet you here next week at the same time?"

He gave me a pained look. "Actually, I prefer to make such transactions in places unrelated to my various businesses."

"Of course. I'm sure I'm not doing this the way you expect."

"I'm used to having no expectations when it comes to the Cullen family." He grimaced and then quickly composed his face again. "Shall we meet at eight o'clock a week from tonight at The Pacifico? It's on Union Lake, and the food is exquisite."

"Perfect." Not that I would be joining him for dinner. He actually wouldn't like it much if I did.

I rose and shook his hand again. This time he didn't flinch. But he did seem to have some new worry on his mind. His mouth was pinched up, his back tense.

"Will you have trouble with that deadline?" I asked.

"What?" He looked up, taken off guard by my question. "The deadline? Oh, no. No worries at all. I will certainly have your documents done on time."

It would have been nice to have Edward here, so that I would know what J's real worries were. I sighed. Keeping secrets from Edward was bad enough; having to be away from him was almost too much.

"Then I'll see you in one week."

# Chapter 34

## DECLARED

I heard the music before I was out of the car. Edward hadn't touched his piano since the night Alice left. Now, as I shut the car door, I heard the song morph through a bridge and change into my lullaby. Edward was welcoming me home.

I moved slowly as I pulled Renesmee—fast asleep; we'd been gone all day—from the car. We'd left Jacob at Charlie's—he'd said he was going to catch a ride home with Sue. I wondered if he was trying to fill his head with enough trivia to crowd out the image of the way my face had looked when I'd walked through Charlie's door. As I walked slowly to the Cullen house now, I recognized that the hope and uplift that seemed almost a visible aura around the big white house had been mine this morning, too. It felt alien to me now.

I wanted to cry again, hearing Edward play for me. But I pulled it together. I didn't want him to be suspicious. I would leave no clues in his mind for Aro if I could help it. Edward turned his head and smiled when I came in the door, but kept playing.

"Welcome home," he said, as if this was just any normal day. As if there weren't twelve other vampires in the room involved in various pursuits, and a dozen more scattered around somewhere. "Did you have a good time with Charlie today?"

“Yes. Sorry I was gone so long. I stepped out to do a little Christmas shopping for Renesmee. I know it won’t be much of an event, but . . .” I shrugged. Edward’s lips turned down. He quit playing and spun around on the bench so that his whole body was facing me. He put one hand on my waist and pulled me closer. “I hadn’t thought much about it. If you want to make an event of it—”

“No,” I interrupted him. I flinched internally at the idea of trying to fake more enthusiasm than the bare minimum. “I just didn’t want to let it pass without giving her something.”

“Do I get to see?”

“If you want. It’s only a little thing.”

Renesmee was completely unconscious, snoring delicately against my neck. I envied her. It would have been nice to escape reality, even for just a few hours. Carefully, I fished the little velvet jewelry bag from my clutch without opening the purse enough for Edward to see the cash I was still carrying.

“It caught my eye from the window of an antique store while I was driving by.”

I shook the little golden locket into his palm. It was round with a slender vine border carved around the outside edge of the circle. Edward popped the tiny catch and looked inside. There was space for a small picture and, on the opposite side, an inscription in French.

“Do you know what this says?” he asked in a different tone, more subdued than before.

“The shopkeeper told me it said something along the lines of ‘more than my own life.’ Is that right?”

“Yes, he had it right.”

He looked up at me, his topaz eyes probing. I met his gaze for a moment, then pretended to be distracted by the television.

“I hope she likes it,” I muttered.

“Of course she will,” he said lightly, casually, and I was sure in that second that he knew I was keeping something from him. I was also sure that he had no idea of the specifics.

“Let’s take her home,” he suggested, standing and putting his arm around my shoulders. I hesitated.

“What?” he demanded.

“I wanted to practice with Emmett a little. . . .” I’d lost the whole day to my vital errand; it made me feel behind.

Emmett—on the sofa with Rose and holding the remote, of course—looked up and grinned in anticipation. “Excellent. The forest needs thinning.”

Edward frowned at Emmett and then at me.

“There’s plenty of time for that tomorrow,” he said.

"Don't be ridiculous," I complained. "There's no such thing as plenty of time anymore. That concept does not exist. I have a lot to learn and—"

He cut me off. "Tomorrow."

And his expression was such that not even Emmett argued.

I was surprised at how hard it was to go back to a routine that was, after all, brand new. But stripping away even that little bit of hope I'd been fostering made everything seem impossible.

I tried to focus on the positives. There was a good chance that my daughter was going to survive what was coming, and Jacob, too. If they had a future, then that was a kind of victory, wasn't it? Our little band must be going to hold their own if Jacob and Renesmee were going to have the opportunity to run in the first place. Yes, Alice's strategy only made sense if we were going to put up a really good fight. So, a kind of victory there, too, considering that the Volturi had never been seriously challenged in millennia.

It was not going to be the end of the world. Just the end of the Cullens. The end of Edward, the end of me.

I preferred it that way—the last part anyway. I would not live without Edward again; if he was leaving this world, then I would be right behind him.

I wondered idly now and then if there would be anything for us on the other side. I knew Edward didn't really believe so, but Carlisle did. I couldn't

imagine it myself. On the other hand, I couldn't imagine Edward not existing somehow, somewhere. If we could be together in any place, then that was a happy ending.

And so the pattern of my days continued, just that much harder than before. We went to see Charlie on Christmas Day, Edward, Renesmee, Jacob, and I. All of Jacob's pack were there, plus Sam, Emily, and Sue. It was a big help to have them there in Charlie's little rooms, their huge, warm bodies wedged into corners around his sparsely decorated tree—you could see exactly where he'd gotten bored and quit—and overflowing his furniture. You could always count on werewolves to be buzzed about a coming fight, no matter how suicidal. The electricity of their excitement provided a nice current that disguised my utter lack of spirit. Edward was, as always, a better actor than I was.

Renesmee wore the locket I'd given her at dawn, and in her jacket pocket was the MP3

player Edward had given her—a tiny thing that held five thousand songs, already filled with Edward's favorites. On her wrist was an intricately braided Quileute version of a promise ring. Edward had gritted his teeth over that one, but it didn't bother me. Soon, so soon, I would be giving her to Jacob for safekeeping. How could I be bothered by any symbol of the commitment I was so relying on?

Edward had saved the day by ordering a gift for Charlie, too. It had shown up yesterday

—priority overnight shipping—and Charlie spent all morning reading the thick instruction manual to his new fishing sonar system.

From the way the werewolves ate, Sue's lunch spread must have been good. I wondered how the gathering would have looked to an outsider. Did we play our parts well enough? Would a stranger have thought us a happy circle of friends, enjoying the holiday with casual cheer?

I think Edward and Jacob both were as relieved as I was when it was time to go. It felt odd to spend energy on the human façade when there were so many more important things to be doing. I had a hard time concentrating. At the same time, this was perhaps the last time I would see Charlie. Maybe it was a good thing that I was too numb to really register that.

I hadn't seen my mother since the wedding, but I found I could only be glad for the gradual distancing that had begun two years ago. She was too fragile for my world. I didn't want her to have any part of this. Charlie was stronger. Maybe even strong enough for a goodbye now, but I wasn't.

It was very quiet in the car; outside, the rain was just a mist, hovering on the edge between liquid and ice. Renesmee sat on my lap, playing with her locket, opening and closing it. I watched her and imagined the things I would say to Jacob right now if I didn't have to keep my words out of Edward's head.

If it's ever safe again, take her to Charlie. Tell him the whole story someday. Tell him how much I loved him, how I couldn't bear to leave him even when my

human life was over. Tell him he was the best father. Tell him to pass my love on to Renée, all my hopes that she will be happy and well. . . .

I would have to give Jacob the documents before it was too late. I would give him a note for Charlie, too. And a letter for Renesmee. Something for her to read when I couldn't tell her I loved her anymore.

There was nothing unusual about the outside of the Cullen house as we pulled into the meadow, but I could hear some kind of subtle uproar inside. Many low voices murmured and growled. It sounded intense, and it sounded like an argument. I could pick out Carlisle's voice and Amun's more often than the others. Edward parked in front of the house rather than going around to the garage. We exchanged one wary glance before we got out of the car.

Jacob's stance changed; his face turned serious and careful. I guessed that he was in Alpha mode now. Obviously, something had happened, and he was going to get the information he and Sam would need.

"Alistair is gone," Edward murmured as we darted up the steps.

Inside the front room, the main confrontation was physically apparent. Lining the walls was a ring of spectators, every vampire who had joined us, except for Alistair and the three involved in the quarrel. Esme, Kebi, and Tia were the closest to the three vampires in the center; in the middle of the room, Amun was hissing at Carlisle and Benjamin. Edward's jaw tightened and he moved quickly to

Esme's side, towing me by the hand. I clutched Renesmee tightly to my chest.

"Amun, if you want to go, no one is forcing you to stay," Carlisle said calmly.

"You're stealing half my coven, Carlisle!" Amun shrieked, stabbing one finger at Benjamin. "Is that why you called me here? To steal from me?"

Carlisle sighed, and Benjamin rolled his eyes.

"Yes, Carlisle picked a fight with the Volturi, endangered his whole family, just to lure me here to my death," Benjamin said sarcastically. "Be reasonable, Amun. I'm committed to do the right thing here—I'm not joining any other coven. You can do whatever you want, of course, as Carlisle has pointed out."

"This won't end well," Amun growled. "Alistair was the only sane one here. We should all be running."

"Think of who you're calling sane," Tia murmured in a quiet aside.

"We're all going to be slaughtered!"

"It's not going to come to a fight," Carlisle said in a firm voice.

"You say!"

"If it does, you can always switch sides, Amun. I'm sure the Volturi will appreciate your help."

Amun sneered at him. "Perhaps that is the answer."

Carlisle's answer was soft and sincere. "I wouldn't hold that against you, Amun. We have been friends for a long time, but I would never ask you to die for me."

Amun's voice was more controlled, too. "But you're taking my Benjamin down with you."

Carlisle put his hand on Amun's shoulder; Amun shook it off.

"I'll stay, Carlisle, but it might be to your detriment. I will join them if that's the road to survival. You're all fools to think that you can defy the Volturi." He scowled, then sighed, glanced at Renesmee and me, and added in an exasperated tone, "I will witness that the child has grown. That's nothing but the truth. Anyone would see that."

"That's all we've ever asked."

Amun grimaced, "But not all that you are getting, it seems." He turned on Benjamin. "I gave you life. You're wasting it."

Benjamin's face looked colder than I'd ever seen it; the expression contrasted oddly with his boyish features. "It's a pity you couldn't replace my will with your own in the process; perhaps then you would have been satisfied with me."

Amun's eyes narrowed. He gestured abruptly to Kebi, and they stalked past us out the front door.

"He's not leaving," Edward said quietly to me, "but he'll be keeping his distance even more from now on.

He wasn't bluffing when he spoke of joining the Volturi."

"Why did Alistair go?" I whispered.

"No one can be positive; he didn't leave a note. From his mutters, it's been clear that he thinks a fight is inevitable. Despite his demeanor, he actually does care too much for Carlisle to stand with the Volturi. I suppose he decided the danger was too much."

Edward shrugged.

Though our conversation was clearly just between the two of us, of course everyone could hear it. Eleazar answered Edward's comment like it had been meant for all.

"From the sound of his mumblings, it was a bit more than that. We haven't spoken much of the Volturi agenda, but Alistair worried that no matter how decisively we can prove your innocence, the Volturi will not listen. He thinks they will find an excuse to achieve their goals here."

The vampires glanced uneasily at one another. The idea that the Volturi would manipulate their own sacrosanct law for gain was not a popular idea. Only the Romanians were composed, their small half-smiles ironic. They seemed amused at how the others wanted to think well of their ancient enemies.

Many low discussions began at the same time, but it was the Romanians I listened to. Maybe because the fair-haired Vladimir kept shooting glances in my direction.

“I do so hope Alistair was right about this,” Stefan murmured to Vladimir. “No matter the outcome, word will spread. It’s time our world saw the Volturi for what they’ve become. They’ll never fall if everyone believes this nonsense about them protecting our way of life.”

“At least when we ruled, we were honest about what we were,” Vladimir replied. Stefan nodded. “We never put on white hats and called ourselves saints.”

“I’m thinking the time has come to fight,” Vladimir said. “How can you imagine we’ll ever find a better force to stand with? Another chance this good?”

“Nothing is impossible. Maybe someday—”

“We’ve been waiting for fifteen hundred years, Stefan. And they’ve only gotten stronger with the years.” Vladimir paused and looked at me again. He showed no surprise when he saw that I was watching him, too. “If the Volturi win this conflict, they will leave with more power than they came with. With every conquest they add to their strengths. Think of what that newborn alone could give them”—he jerked his chin toward me

—“and she is barely discovering her gifts. And the earth-mover.” Vladimir nodded toward Benjamin, who stiffened. Almost everyone was eavesdropping on the Romanians now, like me. “With their witch twins they have no need of the illusionist or the fire touch.” His eyes moved to Zafrina, then Kate.

Stefan looked at Edward. “Nor is the mind reader is exactly necessary. But I see your point. Indeed, they will gain much if they win.”

“More than we can afford to have them gain, wouldn’t you agree?”

Stefan sighed. “I think I must agree. And that means… ”

“That we must stand against them while there is still hope.”

“If we can just cripple them, even, expose them . . .”

“Then, someday, others will finish the job.”

“And our long vendetta will be repaid. At last.”

They locked eyes for a moment and then murmured in unison. “It seems the only way.”

“So we fight,” Stefan said.

Though I could see that they were torn, self-preservation warring with revenge, the smile they exchanged was full of anticipation.

“We fight,” Vladimir agreed.

I suppose it was a good thing; like Alistair, I was sure the battle was impossible to avoid. In that case, two more vampires fighting on our side could only help. But the Romanians’ decision still made me shudder.

“We will fight, too,” Tia said, her usually grave voice more solemn than ever. “We believe the Volturi will

overstep their authority. We have no wish to belong to them."

Her eyes lingered on her mate.

Benjamin grinned and threw an impish glance toward the Romanians. "Apparently, I'm a hot commodity. It appears I have to win the right to be free."

"This won't be the first time I've fought to keep myself from a king's rule," Garrett said in a teasing tone. He walked over and clapped Benjamin on the back. "Here's to freedom from oppression."

"We stand with Carlisle," Tanya said. "And we fight with him."

The Romanians' pronouncement seemed to have made the others feel the need to declare themselves as well.

"We have not decided," Peter said. He looked down at his tiny companion; Charlotte's lips were set in dissatisfaction. It looked like she'd made her decision. I wondered what it was.

"The same goes for me," Randall said.

"And me," Mary added.

"The packs will fight with the Cullens," Jacob said suddenly. "We're not afraid of vampires," he added with a smirk.

"Children," Peter muttered.

"Infants," Randall corrected.

Jacob grinned tauntingly.

“Well, I’m in, too,” Maggie said, shrugging out from under Siobhan’s restraining hand.

“I know truth is on Carlisle’s side. I can’t ignore that.”

Siobhan stared at the junior member of her coven with worried eyes. “Carlisle,” she said as if they were alone, ignoring the suddenly formal feel of the gathering, the unexpected outburst of declarations, “I don’t want this to come to a fight.”

“Nor do I, Siobhan. You know that’s the last thing I want.” He half-smiled. “Perhaps you should concentrate on keeping it peaceful.”

“You know that won’t help,” she said.

I remembered Rose and Carlisle’s discussion of the Irish leader; Carlisle believed that Siobhan had some subtle but powerful gift to make things go her way—and yet Siobhan didn’t believe it herself.

“It couldn’t hurt,” Carlisle said.

Siobhan rolled her eyes. “Shall I visualize the outcome I desire?” she asked sarcastically.

Carlisle was openly grinning now. “If you don’t mind.”

“Then there is no need for my coven to declare itself, is there?” she retorted. “Since there is no possibility of a fight.” She put her hand back on Maggie’s shoulder, pulling the girl closer to her. Siobhan’s mate, Liam, stood silent and expressionless. Almost everyone else in the room looked mystified by Carlisle and

Siobhan's clearly joking exchange, but they didn't explain themselves.

That was the end of the dramatic speeches for the night. The group slowly dispersed, some off to hunt, some to while away the time with Carlisle's books or televisions or computers.

Edward, Renesmee, and I went to hunt. Jacob tagged along.

"Stupid leeches," he muttered to himself when we got outside. "Think they're so superior." He snorted.

"They'll be shocked when the infants save their superior lives, won't they?" Edward said.

Jake smiled and punched his shoulder. "Hell yeah, they will."

This wasn't our last hunting trip. We all would hunt again nearer to the time we expected the Volturi. As the deadline was not exact, we were planning to stay a few nights out in the big baseball clearing Alice had seen, just in case. All we knew was that they would come the day that the snow stuck to the ground. We didn't want the Volturi too close to town, and Demetri would lead them to wherever we were. I wondered who he would track in, and guessed that it would be Edward since he couldn't track me. I thought about Demetri while I hunted, paying little attention to my prey or the drifting snowflakes that had finally appeared but were melting before they touched the rocky soil. Would Demetri realize that he couldn't track me? What would he make of that?

What would Aro? Or was Edward wrong? There were those little exceptions to what I could withstand, those ways around my shield. Everything that was outside my mind was vulnerable—open to the things Jasper, Alice, and Benjamin could do. Maybe Demetri's talent worked a little differently, too.

And then I had a thought that brought me up short. The half-drained elk dropped from my hands to the stony ground. Snowflakes vaporized a few inches from the warm body with tiny sizzling sounds. I stared blankly at my bloody hands. Edward saw my reaction and hurried to my side, leaving his own kill undrained.

"What's wrong?" he asked in a low voice, his eyes sweeping the forest around us, looking for whatever had triggered my behavior.

"Renesmee," I choked.

"She's just through those trees," he reassured me. "I can hear both her thoughts and Jacob's. She's fine."

"That's not what I meant," I said. "I was thinking about my shield—you really think it's worth something, that it will help somehow. I know the others are hoping that I'll be able to shield Zafrina and Benjamin, even if I can only keep it up for a few seconds at a time. What if that's a mistake? What if your trust in me is the reason that we fail?"

My voice was edging toward hysteria, though I had enough control to keep it low. I didn't want to upset Renesmee.

"Bella, what brought this on? Of course, it's wonderful that you can protect yourself, but you're not responsible for saving anyone. Don't distress yourself needlessly."

"But what if I can't protect anything?" I whispered in gasps. "This thing I do, it's faulty, it's erratic! There's no rhyme or reason to it. Maybe it will do nothing against Alec at all."

"Shh," he hushed me. "Don't panic. And don't worry about Alec. What he does is no different than what Jane or Zafrina does. It's just an illusion—he can't get inside your head any more than I can."

"But Renesmee does!" I hissed frantically through my teeth. "It seemed so natural, I never questioned it before. It's always been just part of who she is. But she puts her thoughts right into my head just like she does with everyone else. My shield has holes, Edward!"

I stared at him desperately, waiting for him to acknowledge my terrible revelation. His lips were pursed, as if he was trying to decide how to phrase something. His expression was perfectly relaxed.

"You thought of this a long time ago, didn't you?" I demanded, feeling like an idiot for my months of overlooking the obvious.

He nodded, a faint smile pulling up one corner of his mouth. "The first time she touched you."

I sighed at my own stupidity, but his calm had mellowed me some. “And this doesn’t bother you? You don’t see it as a problem?”

“I have two theories, one more likely than the other.”

“Give me the least likely first.”

“Well, she’s your daughter,” he pointed out. “Genetically half you. I used to tease you about how your mind was on a different frequency than the rest of ours. Perhaps she runs on the same.”

This didn’t work for me. “But you hear her mind just fine. Everyone hears her mind. And what if Alec runs on a different frequency? What if—?”

He put a finger to my lips. “I’ve considered that. Which is why I think this next theory is much more likely.”

I gritted my teeth and waited.

“Do you remember what Carlisle said to me about her, right after she showed you that first memory?”

Of course I remembered. “He said, ‘It’s an interesting twist. Like she’s doing the exact opposite of what you can.’”

“Yes. And so I wondered. Maybe she took your talent and flipped it, too.”

I considered that.

“You keep everyone out,” he began.

“And no one keeps her out?” I finished hesitantly.

"That's my theory," he said. "And if she can get into your head, I doubt there's a shield on the planet who could keep her at bay. That will help. From what we've seen, no one can doubt the truth of her thoughts once they've allowed her to show them. And I think no one can keep her from showing them, if she gets close enough. If Aro allows her to explain. . . ."

I shuddered to think of Renesmee so close to Aro's greedy, milky eyes.

"Well," he said, rubbing my tight shoulders. "At least there's nothing that can stop him from seeing the truth."

"But is the truth enough to stop him?" I murmured.

For that, Edward had no answer.

# Chapter 35

## DEADLINE

"Headed out?" Edward asked, his tone nonchalant. There was a sort of forced composure about his expression. He hugged Renesmee just a little bit tighter to his chest.

"Yes, a few last-minute things…," I responded just as casually. He smiled my favorite smile. "Hurry back to me."

"Always."

I took his Volvo again, wondering if he'd read the odometer after my last errand. How much had he pieced together? That I had a secret, absolutely. Would he have deduced the reason why I didn't confide in him? Did he guess that Aro might soon know everything he knew? I thought Edward could have come to that conclusion, which explained why he had demanded no reasons from me. I guessed he was trying not to speculate too much, trying to keep my behavior off his mind. Had he put this together with my odd performance the morning after Alice left, burning my book in the fire? I didn't know if he could have made that leap.

It was a dreary afternoon, already dark as dusk. I sped through the gloom, my eyes on the heavy clouds. Would it snow tonight? Enough to layer the ground and create the scene from Alice's vision? Edward estimated that we had about two more days. Then we would set ourselves in the clearing, drawing the

Volturi to our chosen place. As I headed through the darkening forest, I considered my last trip to Seattle. I thought I knew Alice's purpose in sending me to the dilapidated drop point where J. Jenks referred his shadier clients. If I'd gone to one of his other, more legitimate offices, would I have ever known what to ask for? If I'd met him as Jason Jenks or Jason Scott, legitimate lawyer, would I ever have unearthed J. Jenks, purveyor of illegal documents?

I'd had to go the route that made it clear I was up to no good. That was my clue. It was black when I pulled into the parking lot of the restaurant a few minutes early, ignoring the eager valets by the entrance. I popped in my contacts and then went to wait for J inside the restaurant. Though I was in a hurry to be done with this depressing necessity and back with my family, J seemed careful to keep himself untainted by his baser associations; I had a feeling a handoff in the dark parking lot would offend his sensibilities.

I gave the name Jenks at the podium, and the obsequious maître d' led me upstairs to a small private room with a fire crackling in a stone hearth. He took the calf-length ivory trench coat I'd worn to disguise the fact that I was wearing Alice's idea of appropriate attire, and gasped quietly at my oyster satin cocktail dress. I couldn't help being a little flattered; I still wasn't used to being beautiful to everyone rather than just Edward. The maître d' stuttered half-formed compliments as he backed unsteadily from the room. I stood by the fire to wait, holding my fingers close to the flame to warm them a little before the inevitable handshake. Not that J

wasn't obviously aware that there was something up with the Cullens, but it was still a good habit to practice. For one half second, I wondered what it would feel like to put my hand in the fire. What it would feel like when I burned. . . .

J's entrance distracted my morbidity. The maître d' took his coat, too, and it was evident that I was not the only one who had dressed up for this meeting.

"I'm so sorry I'm late," J said as soon as we were alone.

"No, you're exactly on time."

He held out his hand, and as we shook I could feel that his fingers were still quite noticeably warmer than mine. It didn't seem to bother him.

"You look stunning, if I may be so bold, Mrs. Cullen."

"Thank you, J. Please, call me Bella."

"I must say, it's a different experience working with you than it is with Mr. Jasper. Much less… unsettling." He smiled hesitantly.

"Really? I've always found Jasper to have a very soothing presence."

His eyebrows pulled together. "Is that so?" he murmured politely while clearly still in disagreement. How odd. What had Jasper done to this man?

"Have you known Jasper long?"

He sighed, looking uncomfortable. "I've been working with Mr. Jasper for more than twenty years, and my

old partner knew him for fifteen years before that…. He never changes.” J cringed delicately.

“Yeah, Jasper’s kind of funny that way.”

J shook his head as if he could shake away the disturbing thoughts. “Won’t you have a seat, Bella?”

“Actually, I’m in a bit of a hurry. I’ve got a long drive home.” As I spoke, I took the thick white envelope with his bonus from my bag and handed it to him.

“Oh,” he said, a little catch of disappointment in his voice. He tucked the envelope into an inside pocket of his jacket without bothering to check the amount. “I was hoping we could speak for just a moment.”

“About?” I asked curiously.

“Well, let me get you your items first. I want to make sure you’re satisfied.”

He turned, placed his briefcase on the table, and popped the latches. He took out a legalsized manila envelope. Though I had no idea what I should be looking for, I opened the envelope and gave the contents a cursory glance. J had flipped Jacob’s picture and changed the coloring so that it wasn’t immediately evident that it was the same picture on both his passport and driver’s license. Both looked perfectly sound to me, but that meant little. I glanced at the picture on Vanessa Wolfe’s passport for a fraction of a second, and then looked away quickly, a lump rising in my throat.

“Thank you,” I told him.

His eyes narrowed slightly, and I felt he was disappointed that my examination was not more thorough. “I can assure you every piece is perfect. All will pass the most rigorous scrutiny by experts.”

“I’m sure they are. I truly appreciate what you’ve done for me, J.”

“It’s been my pleasure, Bella. In the future, feel free to come to me for anything the Cullen family needs.” He didn’t even hint at it really, but this sounded like an invitation for me to take over Jasper’s place as liaison.

“There was something you wanted to discuss?”

“Er, yes. It’s a bit delicate. . . .” He gestured to the stone hearth with a questioning expression. I sat on the edge of the stone, and he sat beside me. Sweat was dewing up on his forehead again, and he pulled a blue silk handkerchief from his pocket and began mopping.

“You are the sister of Mr. Jasper’s wife? Or married to his brother?” he asked.

“Married to his brother,” I clarified, wondering where this was leading.

“You would be Mr. Edward’s bride, then?”

“Yes.”

He smiled apologetically. “I’ve seen all the names many times, you see. My belated congratulations. It’s nice that Mr. Edward has found such a lovely partner after all this time.”

"Thank you very much."

He paused, dabbing at the sweat. "Over the years, you might imagine that I've developed a very healthy level of respect for Mr. Jasper and the entire family."

I nodded cautiously.

He took a deep breath and then exhaled without speaking.

"J, please just say whatever you need to."

He took another breath and then mumbled quickly, slurring the words together.

"If you could just assure me that you are not planning to kidnap the little girl from her father, I would sleep better tonight."

"Oh," I said, stunned. It took me a minute to understand the erroneous conclusion he'd drawn. "Oh no. It's nothing like that at all." I smiled weakly, trying to reassure him.

"I'm simply preparing a safe place for her in case something were to happen to my husband and me."

His eyes narrowed. "Are you expecting something to happen?" He blushed, then apologized. "Not that it's any of my business."

I watched the red flush spread behind the delicate membrane of his skin and was glad—

as I often was—that I was not the average newborn. J seemed a nice enough man, criminal behavior aside, and it would have been a shame to kill him.

"You never know." I sighed.

He frowned. "May I wish you the best of luck, then. And please don't be put out with me, my dear, but... if Mr. Jasper should come to me and ask what names I put on these documents . . ."

"Of course you should tell him immediately. I'd like nothing better than to have Mr. Jasper fully aware of our entire transaction."

My transparent sincerity seemed to ease a bit of his tension.

"Very good," he said. "And I can't prevail upon you to stay for dinner?"

"I'm sorry, J. I'm short on time at present."

"Then, again, my best wishes for your health and happiness. Anything at all the Cullen family needs, please don't hesitate to call on me, Bella."

"Thank you, J."

I left with my contraband, glancing back to see that J was staring after me, his expression a mixture of anxiety and regret.

The return trip took me less time. The night was black, and so I turned off my headlights and floored it. When I got back to the house, most of the cars, including Alice's Porsche and my Ferrari, were missing. The traditional vampires were going as far away as possible to satiate their thirst. I tried not to think of their hunting in the night, cringing at the mental picture of their victims.

Only Kate and Garrett were in the front room, arguing playfully about the nutritional value of animal blood. I inferred that Garrett had attempted a hunting trip vegetarianstyle and found it difficult. Edward must have taken Renesmee home to sleep. Jacob, no doubt, was in the woods close by the cottage. The rest of my family must have been hunting as well. Perhaps they were out with the other Denalis.

Which basically gave me the house to myself, and I was quick to take advantage. I could smell that I was the first one to enter Alice and Jasper's room in a long while, maybe the first since the night they'd left us. I rooted silently through their huge closet until I found the right sort of bag. It must have been Alice's; it was a small black leather backpack, the kind that was usually used as a purse, little enough that even Renesmee could carry it without looking out of place. Then I raided their petty cash, taking about twice the yearly income for the average American household. I guessed my theft would be less noticeable here than anywhere else in the house, since this room made everyone sad. The envelope with the fake passports and IDs went into the bag on top of the money. Then I sat on the edge of Alice and Jasper's bed and looked at the pitifully insignificant package that was all I could give my daughter and my best friend to help save their lives. I slumped against the bedpost, feeling helpless. But what else could I do?

I sat there for several minutes with my head bowed before the inkling of a good idea came to me.

If…

If I was to assume that Jacob and Renesmee were going to escape, then that included the assumption that Demetri would be dead. That gave any survivors a little breathing room, Alice and Jasper included.

So why couldn't Alice and Jasper help Jacob and Renesmee? If they were reunited, Renesmee would have the best protection imaginable. There was no reason why this couldn't happen, except for the fact that Jake and Renesmee both were blind spots for Alice. How would she begin to look for them?

I deliberated for a moment, then left the room, crossing the hall to Carlisle and Esme's suite. As usual, Esme's desk was stacked with plans and blueprints, everything neatly laid out in tall piles. The desk had a slew of pigeonholes above the work surface; in one was a box of stationery. I took a fresh sheet of paper and a pen. Then I stared at the blank ivory page for a full five minutes, concentrating on my decision. Alice might not be able to see Jacob or Renesmee, but she could see me. I visualized her seeing this moment, hoping desperately that she wasn't too busy to pay attention.

Slowly, deliberately, I wrote the words RIO DE JANEIRO in all caps across the page. Rio seemed the best place to send them: It was far away from here, Alice and Jasper were already in South America at last report, and it wasn't like our old problems had ceased to exist just because we had worse problems now. There was still the mystery of Renesmee's future, the terror of her racing age. We'd been headed south anyway. Now it would be Jacob's, and hopefully Alice's, job to search for the legends. I bowed my head

again against a sudden urge to sob, clenching my teeth together. It was better that Renesmee go on without me. But I already missed her so much I could barely stand it.

I took a deep breath and put the note at the bottom of the duffel bag, where Jacob would find it soon enough.

I crossed my fingers that—since it was unlikely that his high school offered Portuguese

—Jake had at least taken Spanish as his language elective.

There was nothing left now but waiting.

For two days, Edward and Carlisle stayed in the clearing where Alice had seen the Volturi arrive. It was the same killing field where Victoria's newborns had attacked last summer. I wondered if it felt repetitive to Carlisle, like déjà vu. For me, it would be all new. This time Edward and I would stand with our family.

We could only imagine that the Volturi would be tracking either Edward or Carlisle. I wondered if it would surprise them that their prey didn't run. Would that make them wary? I couldn't imagine the Volturi ever feeling a need for caution. Though I was—hopefully—invisible to Demetri, I stayed with Edward. Of course. We only had a few hours left to be together.

Edward and I had not had a last grand scene of farewell, nor did I plan one. To speak the word was to

make it final. It would be the same as typing the words The End on the last page of a manuscript. So we did not say our goodbyes, and we stayed very close to each other, always touching. Whatever end found us, it would not find us separated. We set up a tent for Renesmee a few yards back into the protective forest, and then there was more déjà vu as we found ourselves camping in the cold again with Jacob. It was almost impossible to believe how much things had changed since last June. Seven months ago, our triangular relationship seemed impossible, three different kinds of heartbreak that could not be avoided. Now everything was in perfect balance. It seemed hideously ironic that the puzzle pieces would fit together just in time for all of them to be destroyed.

It started to snow again the night before New Year's Eve. This time, the tiny flakes did not dissolve into the stony ground of the clearing. While Renesmee and Jacob slept—

Jacob snoring so loudly I wondered how Renesmee didn't wake—the snow made first a thin icing over the earth, then built into thicker drifts. By the time the sun rose, the scene from Alice's vision was complete. Edward and I held hands as we stared across the glittering white field, and neither of us spoke.

Through the early morning, the others gathered, their eyes bearing mute evidence of their preparations—some light gold, some rich crimson. Soon after we all were together, we could hear the wolves moving in the woods. Jacob emerged from the tent, leaving Renesmee still sleeping, to join them.

Edward and Carlisle were arraying the others into a loose formation, our witnesses to the sides like galleries.

I watched from a distance, waiting by the tent for Renesmee to wake. When she did, I helped her dress in the clothes I'd carefully picked out two days before. Clothes that looked frilly and feminine but that were actually sturdy enough to not show any wear—

even if a person wore them while riding a giant werewolf through a couple of states. Over her jacket I put on the black leather backpack with the documents, the money, the clue, and my love notes for her and Jacob, Charlie and Renée. She was strong enough that it was no burden to her.

Her eyes were huge as she read the agony on my face. But she had guessed enough not to ask me what I was doing.

"I love you," I told her. "More than anything."

"I love you, too, Momma," she answered. She touched the locket at her neck, which now held a tiny photo of her, Edward, and me. "We'll always be together."

"In our hearts we'll always be together," I corrected in a whisper as quiet as a breath.

"But when the time comes today, you have to leave me."

Her eyes widened, and she touched her hand to my cheek. The silent no was louder than if she'd shouted it.

I fought to swallow; my throat felt swollen. "Will you do it for me? Please?"

She pressed her fingers harder to my face. Why?

"I can't tell you," I whispered. "But you'll understand soon. I promise."

In my head, I saw Jacob's face.

I nodded, then pulled her fingers away. "Don't think of it," I breathed into her ear.

"Don't tell Jacob until I tell you to run, okay?"

This she understood. She nodded, too.

I took from my pocket one last detail.

While packing Renesmee's things, an unexpected sparkle of color had caught my eye. A chance ray of sun through the skylight had hit the jewels on the ancient precious box stuffed high overhead on a shelf in an untouched corner. I considered it for a moment and then shrugged. After putting together Alice's clues, I couldn't hope that the coming confrontation would be resolved peacefully. But why not try to start things out as friendly as possible? I asked myself. What could it hurt? So I guess I must have had some hope left after all—blind, senseless hope—because I'd scaled the shelves and retrieved Aro's wedding present to me.

Now I fastened the thick gold rope around my neck and felt the weight of the enormous diamond nestle into the hollow of my throat.

"Pretty," Renesmee whispered. Then she wrapped her arms like a vise around my neck. I squeezed her against my chest. Interlocked this way, I carried her out of the tent and to the clearing.

Edward cocked one eyebrow as I approached, but otherwise did not remark on my accessory or Renesmee's. He just put his arms tight around us both for one long moment and then, with a deep sigh, let us go. I couldn't see a goodbye anywhere in his eyes. Maybe he had more hope for something after this life than he'd let on. We took our place, Renesmee climbing agilely onto my back to leave my hands free. I stood a few feet behind the front line made up by Carlisle, Edward, Emmett, Rosalie, Tanya, Kate, and Eleazar. Close beside me were Benjamin and Zafrina; it was my job to protect them as long as I was able. They were our best offensive weapons. If the Volturi were the ones who could not see, even for a few moments, that would change everything.

Zafrina was rigid and fierce, with Senna almost a mirror image at her side. Benjamin sat on the ground, his palms pressed to the dirt, and muttered quietly about fault lines. Last night, he'd strewn piles of boulders in natural-looking, now snow-covered heaps all along the back of the meadow. They weren't enough to injure a vampire, but hopefully enough to distract one.

The witnesses clustered to our left and right, some nearer than others—those who had declared themselves were the closest. I noticed Siobhan rubbing her temples, her eyes closed in

concentration; was she humoring Carlisle? Trying to visualize a diplomatic resolution?

In the woods behind us, the invisible wolves were still and ready; we could only hear their heavy panting, their beating hearts.

The clouds rolled in, diffusing the light so that it could have been morning or afternoon. Edward's eyes tightened as he scrutinized the view, and I was sure he was seeing this exact scene for the second time—the first time being Alice's vision. It would look just the same when the Volturi arrived. We only had minutes or seconds left now. All our family and allies braced themselves.

From the forest, the huge russet Alpha wolf came forward to stand at my side; it must have been too hard for him to keep his distance from Renesmee when she was in such immediate danger.

Renesmee reached out to twine her fingers in the fur over his massive shoulder, and her body relaxed a little bit. She was calmer with Jacob close. I felt a tiny bit better, too. As long Jacob was with Renesmee, she would be all right.

Without risking a glance behind, Edward reached back to me. I stretched my arm forward so that I could grip his hand. He squeezed my fingers.

Another minute ticked by, and I found myself straining to hear some sound of approach. And then Edward stiffened and hissed low between his clenched teeth. His eyes focused on the forest due north of where we stood.

We stared where he did, and waited as the last seconds passed.

# Chapter 36

## BLOODLUST

They came with pageantry, with a kind of beauty.

They came in a rigid, formal formation. They moved together, but it was not a march; they flowed in perfect synchronicity from the trees—a dark, unbroken shape that seemed to hover a few inches above the white snow, so smooth was the advance. The outer perimeter was gray; the color darkened with each line of bodies until the heart of the formation was deepest black. Every face was cowled, shadowed. The faint brushing sound of their feet was so regular it was like music, a complicated beat that never faltered.

At some sign I did not see—or perhaps there was no sign, only millennia of practice—

the configuration folded outward. The motion was too stiff, too square to resemble the opening of a flower, though the color suggested that; it was the opening of a fan, graceful but very angular. The gray-cloaked figures spread to the flanks while the darker forms surged precisely forward in the center, each movement closely controlled. Their progress was slow but deliberate, with no hurry, no tension, no anxiety. It was the pace of the invincible.

This was almost my old nightmare. The only thing lacking was the gloating desire I'd seen on the faces in my dream—the smiles of vindictive joy. Thus far, the Volturi were too disciplined to show any emotion at

all. They also showed no surprise or dismay at the collection of vampires that waited for them here—a collection that looked suddenly disorganized and unprepared in comparison. They showed no surprise at the giant wolf that stood in our midst.

I couldn't help counting. There were thirty-two of them. Even if you did not count the two drifting, waifish black-cloaked figures in the very back, who I took to be the wives

—their protected position suggesting that they would not be involved in the attack—we were still outnumbered. There were just nineteen of us who would fight, and then seven more to watch as we were destroyed. Even counting the ten wolves, they had us.

"The redcoats are coming, the redcoats are coming," Garrett muttered mysteriously to himself and then chuckled once. He slid one step closer to Kate.

"They did come," Vladimir whispered to Stefan.

"The wives," Stefan hissed back. "The entire guard. All of them together. It's well we didn't try Volterra."

And then, as if their numbers were not enough, while the Volturi slowly and majestically advanced, more vampires began entering the clearing behind them. The faces in this seemingly endless influx of vampires were the antithesis to the Volturi's expressionless discipline—they wore a kaleidoscope of emotions. At first there was the shock and even some anxiety as they saw the unexpected force awaiting them. But that concern passed quickly; they were secure in their overwhelming numbers, secure in their position

behind the unstoppable Volturi force. Their features returned to the expression they'd worn before we'd surprised them.

It was easy enough to understand their mindset—the faces were that explicit. This was an angry mob, whipped to a frenzy and slavering for justice. I did not fully realize the vampire world's feeling toward the immortal children before I read these faces. It was clear that this motley, disorganized horde—more than forty vampires altogether

—was the Volturi's own kind of witness. When we were dead, they would spread the word that the criminals had been eradicated, that the Volturi had acted with nothing but impartiality. Most looked like they hoped for more than just an opportunity to witness—

they wanted to help tear and burn.

We didn't have a prayer. Even if we could somehow neutralize the Volturi's advantages, they could still bury us in bodies. Even if we killed Demetri, Jacob would not be able to outrun this.

I could feel it as the same comprehension sunk in around me. Despair weighted the air, pushing me down with more pressure than before.

One vampire in the opposing force did not seem to belong to either party; I recognized Irina as she hesitated in between the two companies, her expression unique among the others. Irina's horrified gaze was locked on Tanya's position in the front line. Edward snarled, a very low but fervent sound.

"Alistair was right," he murmured to Carlisle.

I watched Carlisle glance at Edward questioningly.

"Alistair was right?" Tanya whispered.

"They—Caius and Aro—come to destroy and acquire," Edward breathed almost silently back; only our side could hear. "They have many layers of strategy already in place. If Irina's accusation had somehow proven to be false, they were committed to find another reason to take offense. But they can see Renesmee now, so they are perfectly sanguine about their course. We could still attempt to defend against their other contrived charges, but first they have to stop, to hear the truth about Renesmee." Then, even lower. "Which they have no intention of doing."

Jacob gave a strange little huff.

And then, unexpectedly, two seconds later, the procession did halt. The low music of perfectly synchronized movements turned to silence. The flawless discipline remained unbroken; the Volturi froze into absolute stillness as one. They stood about a hundred yards away from us.

Behind me, to the sides, I heard the beating of large hearts, closer than before. I risked glances to the left and the right from the corners of my eyes to see what had stopped the Volturi advance.

The wolves had joined us.

On either side of our uneven line, the wolves branched out in long, bordering arms. I only spared a fraction of a second to note that there were more than

ten wolves, to recognize the wolves I knew and the ones I'd never seen before. There were sixteen of them spaced evenly around us—seventeen total, counting Jacob. It was clear from their heights and oversized paws that the newcomers all were very, very young. I supposed I should have foreseen this. With so many vampires encamped in the neighborhood, a werewolf population explosion was inevitable.

More children dying. I wondered why Sam had allowed this, and then I realized he had no other choice. If any of the wolves stood with us, the Volturi would be sure to search out the rest. They had gambled their entire species on this stand. And we were going to lose.

Abruptly, I was furious. Beyond furious, I was murderously enraged. My hopeless despair vanished entirely. A faint reddish glow highlighted the dark figures in front of me, and all I wanted in that moment was the chance to sink my teeth into them, to rip their limbs from their bodies and pile them for burning. I was so maddened I could have danced around the pyre where they roasted alive; I would have laughed while their ashes smoldered. My lips curved back automatically, and a low, fierce snarl tore up my throat from the pit of my stomach. I realized the corners of my mouth were turned up in a smile.

Beside me, Zafrina and Senna echoed my hushed growl. Edward squeezed the hand he still held, cautioning me.

The shadowed Volturi faces were still expressionless for the most part. Only two sets of eyes betrayed any emotion at all. In the very center, touching hands, Aro and Caius had paused to evaluate, and the entire guard had paused with them, waiting for the order to kill. The two did not look at each other, but it was obvious that they were communicating. Marcus, though touching Aro's other hand, did not seem part of the conversation. His expression was not as mindless as the guards', but it was nearly as blank. Like the one other time I'd seen him, he appeared to be utterly bored. The bodies of the Volturi's witnesses leaned toward us, their eyes fixed furiously on Renesmee and me, but they stayed near the fringe of the forest, leaving a wide berth between themselves and the Volturi soldiers. Only Irina hovered close behind the Volturi, just a few paces away from the ancient females—both fair-haired with powdery skin and filmed eyes—and their two massive bodyguards.

There was a woman in one of the darker gray cloaks just behind Aro. I couldn't be sure, but it looked like she might actually be touching his back. Was this the other shield, Renata? I wondered, as Eleazar had, if she would be able to repel me. But I would not waste my life trying to get to Caius or Aro. I had more vital targets. I searched the line for them now and had no difficulty picking out the two petite, deep gray cloaks near the heart of the arrangement. Alec and Jane, easily the smallest members of the guard, stood just to Marcus's side, flanked by Demetri on the other. Their lovely faces were smooth, giving nothing away; they wore the darkest cloaks beside the pure black of the ancients. The witch twins, Vladimir had called

them. Their powers were the cornerstone of the Volturi offensive. The jewels in Aro's collection. My muscles flexed, and venom welled in my mouth.

Aro's and Caius's clouded red eyes flickered across our line. I read disappointment in Aro's face as his gaze roved over our faces again and again, looking for one that was missing. Chagrin tightened his lips.

In that moment, I was nothing but grateful that Alice had run.

As the pause lengthened, I heard Edward's breath speed.

"Edward?" Carlisle asked, low and anxious.

"They're not sure how to proceed. They're weighing options, choosing key targets—

me, of course, you, Eleazar, Tanya. Marcus is reading the strength of our ties to each other, looking for weak points. The Romanians' presence irritates them. They're worried about the faces they don't recognize—Zafrina and Senna in particular—and the wolves, naturally. They've never been outnumbered before. That's what stopped them."

"Outnumbered?" Tanya whispered incredulously.

"They don't count their witnesses," Edward breathed. "They are nonentities, meaningless to the guard. Aro just enjoys an audience."

"Should I speak?" Carlisle asked.

Edward hesitated, then nodded. “This is the only chance you’ll get.”

Carlisle squared his shoulders and paced several steps ahead of our defensive line. I hated to see him alone, unprotected.

He spread his arms, holding his palms up as if in greeting. “Aro, my old friend. It’s been centuries.”

The white clearing was dead silent for a long moment. I could feel the tension rolling off Edward as he listened to Aro’s assessment of Carlisle’s words. The strain mounted as the seconds ticked by.

And then Aro stepped forward out of the center of the Volturi formation. The shield, Renata, moved with him as if the tips of her fingers were sewn to his robe. For the first time, the Volturi ranks reacted. A muttered grumble rolled through the line, eyebrows lowered into scowls, lips curled back from teeth. A few of the guard leaned forward into a crouch.

Aro held one hand up toward them. “Peace.”

He walked just a few paces more, then cocked his head to one side. His milky eyes glinted with curiosity.

“Fair words, Carlisle,” he breathed in his thin, wispy voice. “They seem out of place, considering the army you’ve assembled to kill me, and to kill my dear ones.”

Carlisle shook his head and stretched his right hand forward as if there were not still almost a hundred yards between them. “You have but to touch my hand to know that was never my intent.”

Aro's shrewd eyes narrowed. "But how can your intent possibly matter, dear Carlisle, in the face of what you have done?" He frowned, and a shadow of sadness crossed his features—whether it was genuine or not, I could not tell.

"I have not committed the crime you are here to punish me for."

"Then step aside and let us punish those responsible. Truly, Carlisle, nothing would please me more than to preserve your life today."

"No one has broken the law, Aro. Let me explain." Again, Carlisle offered his hand. Before Aro could answer, Caius drifted swiftly forward to Aro's side.

"So many pointless rules, so many unnecessary laws you create for yourself, Carlisle,"

the white-haired ancient hissed. "How is it possible that you defend the breaking of one that truly matters?"

"The law is not broken. If you would listen—"

"We see the child, Carlisle," Caius snarled. "Do not treat us as fools."

"She is not an immortal. She is not a vampire. I can easily prove this with just a few moments—"

Caius cut him off. "If she is not one of the forbidden, then why have you massed a battalion to protect her?"

“Witnesses, Caius, just as you have brought.” Carlisle gestured to the angry horde at the edge of the woods; some of them growled in response. “Any one of these friends can tell you the truth about the child. Or you could just look at her, Caius. See the flush of human blood in her cheeks.”

“Artifice!” Caius snapped. “Where is the informer? Let her come forward!” He craned his neck around until he spotted Irina lingering behind the wives. “You! Come!”

Irina stared at him uncomprehendingly, her face like that of someone who has not entirely awakened from a hideous nightmare. Impatiently, Caius snapped his fingers. One of the wives’ huge bodyguards moved to Irina’s side and prodded her roughly in the back. Irina blinked twice and then walked slowly toward Caius in a daze. She stopped several yards short, her eyes still on her sisters.

Caius closed the distance between them and slapped her across the face. It couldn’t have hurt, but there was something terribly degrading about the action. It was like watching someone kick a dog. Tanya and Kate hissed in synchronization. Irina’s body went rigid and her eyes finally focused on Caius. He pointed one clawed finger at Renesmee, where she clung to my back, her fingers still tangled in Jacob’s fur. Caius turned entirely red in my furious view. A growl rumbled through Jacob’s chest.

“This is the child you saw?” Caius demanded. “The one that was obviously more than human?”

Irina peered at us, examining Renesmee for the first time since entering the clearing. Her head tilted to the side, confusion crossed her features.

“Well?” Caius snarled.

“I… I’m not sure,” she said, her tone perplexed.

Caius’s hand twitched as if he wanted to slap her again. “What do you mean?” he said in a steely whisper.

“She’s not the same, but I think it’s the same child. What I mean is, she’s changed. This child is bigger than the one I saw, but—”

Caius’s furious gasp crackled through his suddenly bared teeth, and Irina broke off without finishing. Aro flitted to Caius’s side and put a restraining hand on his shoulder.

“Be composed, brother. We have time to sort this out. No need to be hasty.”

With a sullen expression, Caius turned his back on Irina.

“Now, sweetling,” Aro said in a warm, sugary murmur. “Show me what you’re trying to say.” He held his hand out to the bewildered vampire.

Uncertainly, Irina took his hand. He held hers for only five seconds.

“You see, Caius?” he said. “It’s a simple matter to get what we need.”

Caius didn't answer him. From the corner of his eye, Aro glanced once at his audience, his mob, and then turned back to Carlisle.

"And so we have a mystery on our hands, it seems. It would appear the child has grown. Yet Irina's first memory was clearly that of an immortal child. Curious."

"That's exactly what I'm trying to explain," Carlisle said, and from the change in his voice, I could guess at his relief. This was the pause we had pinned all our nebulous hopes on.

I felt no relief. I waited, almost numb with rage, for the layers of strategy Edward had promised.

Carlisle held out his hand again.

Aro hesitated for a moment. "I would rather have the explanation from someone more central to the story, my friend. Am I wrong to assume that this breach was not of your making?"

"There was no breach."

"Be that as it may, I will have every facet of the truth." Aro's feathery voice hardened.

"And the best way to get that is to have the evidence directly from your talented son."

He inclined his head in Edward's direction. "As the child clings to his newborn mate, I'm assuming Edward is involved."

Of course he wanted Edward. Once he could see into Edward's mind, he would know all our thoughts. Except mine.

Edward turned to quickly kiss my forehead and Renesmee's, not meeting my eyes. Then he strode across the snowy field, clapping Carlisle on the shoulder as he passed. I heard a low whimper from behind me—Esme's terror breaking through.

The red haze I saw around the Volturi army flamed brighter than before. I could not bear to watch Edward cross the empty white space alone—but I also could not endure to have Renesmee one step closer to our adversaries. The opposing needs tore at me; I was frozen so tightly it felt like my bones might shatter from the pressure of it. I saw Jane smile as Edward crossed the midpoint in the distance between us, when he was closer to them than he was to us.

That smug little smile did it. My fury peaked, higher even than the raging bloodlust I'd felt the moment the wolves had committed to this doomed fight. I could taste madness on my tongue—I felt it flow through me like a tidal wave of pure power. My muscles tightened, and I acted automatically. I threw my shield with all the force in my mind, flung it across the impossible expanse of the field—ten times my best distance—like a javelin. My breath rushed out in a huff with the exertion.

The shield blew out from me in a bubble of sheer energy, a mushroom cloud of liquid steel. It pulsed like a living thing—I could feel it, from the apex to the edges. There was no recoil to the elastic fabric now; in

that instant of raw force, I saw that the backlash I'd felt before was of my own making—I had been clinging to that invisible part of me in self-defense, subconsciously unwilling to let it go. Now I set it free, and my shield exploded a good fifty yards out from me effortlessly, taking only a fraction of my concentration. I could feel it flex like just another muscle, obedient to my will. I pushed it, shaped it to a long, pointed oval. Everything underneath the flexible iron shield was suddenly a part of me—I could feel the life force of everything it covered like points of bright heat, dazzling sparks of light surrounding me. I thrust the shield forward the length of the clearing, and exhaled in relief when I felt Edward's brilliant light within my protection. I held there, contracting this new muscle so that it closely surrounded Edward, a thin but unbreakable sheet between his body and our enemies. Barely a second had passed. Edward was still walking to Aro. Everything had changed absolutely, but no one had noticed the explosion except for me. A startled laugh burst through my lips. I felt the others glancing at me and saw Jacob's big black eye roll down to stare at me like I'd lost my mind.

Edward stopped a few steps away from Aro, and I realized with some chagrin that though I certainly could, I should not prevent this exchange from happening. This was the point of all our preparations: getting Aro to hear our side of the story. It was almost physically painful to do it, but reluctantly I pulled my shield back and left Edward exposed again. The laughing mood had vanished. I focused totally on

Edward, ready to shield him instantly if something went wrong.

Edward's chin came up arrogantly, and he held his hand out to Aro as if he were conferring a great honor. Aro seemed only delighted with his attitude, but his delight was not universal. Renata fluttered nervously in Aro's shadow. Caius's scowl was so deep it looked like his papery, translucent skin would crease permanently. Little Jane showed her teeth, and beside her Alec's eyes narrowed in concentration. I guessed that he was ready, like me, to act at a second's notice.

Aro closed the distance without pause—and really, what did he have to fear? The hulking shadows of the lighter gray cloaks—the brawny fighters like Felix—were but a few yards away. Jane and her burning gift could throw Edward on the ground, writhing in agony. Alec could blind and deafen him before he could take a step in Aro's direction. No one knew that I had the power to stop them, not even Edward. With an untroubled smile, Aro took Edward's hand. His eyes snapped shut at once, and then his shoulders hunched under the onslaught of information.

Every secret thought, every strategy, every insight—everything Edward had heard in the minds around him during the last month—was now Aro's. And further back—every vision of Alice's, every quiet moment with our family, every picture in Renesmee's head, every kiss, every touch between Edward and me... All of that was Aro's now, too. I hissed with frustration, and the shield roiled with my irritation, shifting its shape and contracting around our side.

“Easy, Bella,” Zafrina whispered to me.

I clenched my teeth together.

Aro continued to concentrate on Edward’s memories. Edward’s head bowed, too, the muscles in his neck locking tight as he read back again everything that Aro took from him, and Aro’s response to it all.

This two-way but unequal conversation continued long enough that even the guard grew uneasy. Low murmurs ran through the line until Caius barked a sharp order for silence. Jane was edging forward like she couldn’t help herself, and Renata’s face was rigid with distress. For a moment, I examined this powerful shield that seemed so panicky and weak; though she was useful to Aro, I could tell she was no warrior. It was not her job to fight but to protect. There was no bloodlust in her. Raw as I was, I knew that if this were between her and me, I would obliterate her.

I refocused as Aro straightened, his eyes flashing open, their expression awed and wary. He did not release Edward’s hand.

Edward’s muscles loosened ever so slightly.

“You see?” Edward asked, his velvet voice calm.

“Yes, I see, indeed,” Aro agreed, and amazingly, he sounded almost amused. “I doubt whether any two among gods or mortals have ever seen quite so clearly.”

The disciplined faces of the guard showed the same disbelief I felt.

"You have given me much to ponder, young friend," Aro continued. "Much more than I expected." Still he did not release Edward's hand, and Edward's tense stance was that of one who listens.

Edward didn't answer.

"May I meet her?" Aro asked—almost pleaded—with sudden eager interest. "I never dreamed of the existence of such a thing in all my centuries. What an addition to our histories!"

"What is this about, Aro?" Caius snapped before Edward could answer. Just the question had me pulling Renesmee around into my arms, cradling her protectively against my chest.

"Something you've never dreamed of, my practical friend. Take a moment to ponder, for the justice we intended to deliver no longer applies."

Caius hissed in surprise at his words.

"Peace, brother," Aro cautioned soothingly.

This should have been good news—these were the words we'd been hoping for, the reprieve we'd never really thought possible. Aro had listened to the truth. Aro had admitted that the law had not been broken.

But my eyes were riveted on Edward, and I saw the muscles in his back tighten. I replayed in my head Aro's instruction for Caius to ponder, and heard the double meaning.

“Will you introduce me to your daughter?” Aro asked Edward again. Caius was not the only one who hissed at this new revelation.

Edward nodded reluctantly. And yet, Renesmee had won over so many others. Aro always seemed the leader of the ancients. If he were on her side, could the others act against us?

Aro still gripped Edward’s hand, and he now answered a question that the rest of us had not heard.

“I think a compromise on this one point is certainly acceptable, under the circumstance. We will meet in the middle.”

Aro released his hand. Edward turned back toward us, and Aro joined him, throwing one arm casually over Edward’s shoulder like they were the best of friends—all the while maintaining contact with Edward’s skin. They began to cross the field back to our side.

The entire guard fell into step behind them. Aro raised a hand negligently without looking at them.

“Hold, my dear ones. Truly, they mean us no harm if we are peaceable.”

The guard reacted to this more openly than before, with snarls and hisses of protest, but held their position. Renata, clinging closer to Aro than ever, whimpered in anxiety.

“Master,” she whispered.

"Don't fret, my love," he responded. "All is well."

"Perhaps you should bring a few members of your guard with us," Edward suggested.

"It will make them more comfortable."

Aro nodded as if this was a wise observation he should have thought of himself. He snapped his fingers twice. "Felix, Demetri."

The two vampires were at his side instantaneously, looking precisely the same as the last time I'd met them. Both were tall and dark-haired, Demetri hard and lean as the blade of a sword, Felix hulking and menacing as an iron-spiked cudgel. The five of them stopped in the middle of the snowy field.

"Bella," Edward called. "Bring Renesmee… and a few friends."

I took a deep breath. My body was tight with opposition. The idea of taking Renesmee into the center of the conflict… But I trusted Edward. He would know if Aro was planning any treachery at this point.

Aro had three protectors on his side of the summit, so I would bring two with me. It took me only a second to decide.

"Jacob? Emmett?" I asked quietly. Emmett, because he would be dying to go. Jacob, because he wouldn't be able to bear being left behind.

Both nodded. Emmett grinned.

I crossed the field with them flanking me. I heard another rumble from the guard as they saw my choices—clearly, they did not trust the werewolf. Aro lifted his hand, waving away their protest again.

“Interesting company you keep,” Demetri murmured to Edward.

Edward didn’t respond, but a low growl slipped through Jacob’s teeth. We stopped a few yards from Aro. Edward ducked under Aro’s arm and quickly joined us, taking my hand.

For a moment we faced each other in silence. Then Felix greeted me in a low aside.

“Hello again, Bella.” He grinned cockily while still tracking Jacob’s every twitch with his peripheral vision.

I smiled wryly at the mountainous vampire. “Hey, Felix.”

Felix chuckled. “You look good. Immortality suits you.”

“Thanks so much.”

“You’re welcome. It’s too bad . . .”

He let his comment trail off into silence, but I didn’t need Edward’s gift to imagine the end. It’s too bad we’re going to kill you in a sec.

“Yes, too bad, isn’t it?” I murmured.

Felix winked.

Aro paid no attention to our exchange. He leaned his head to one side, fascinated. “I hear her strange heart,” he murmured with an almost musical lilt to his words. “I smell her strange scent.” Then his hazy eyes shifted to me. “In truth, young Bella, immortality does become you most extraordinarily,” he said. “It is as if you were designed for this life.”

I nodded once in acknowledgment of his flattery.

“You liked my gift?” he asked, eyeing the pendant I wore.

“It’s beautiful, and very, very generous of you. Thank you. I probably should have sent a note.”

Aro laughed delightedly. “It’s just a little something I had lying around. I thought it might complement your new face, and so it does.”

I heard a little hiss from the center of the Volturi line. I glanced over Aro’s shoulder. Hmm. It seemed Jane wasn’t happy about the fact that Aro had given me a present. Aro cleared his throat to reclaim my attention. “May I greet your daughter, lovely Bella?” he asked sweetly.

This was what we’d hoped for, I reminded myself. Fighting the urge to take Renesmee and run for it, I walked two slow steps forward. My shield rippled out behind me like a cape, protecting the rest of my family while Renesmee was left exposed. It felt wrong, horrible.

Aro met us, his face beaming.

"But she's exquisite," he murmured. "So like you and Edward." And then louder,

"Hello, Renesmee."

Renesmee looked at me quickly. I nodded.

"Hello, Aro," she answered formally in her high, ringing voice. Aro's eyes were bemused.

"What is it?" Caius hissed from behind. He seemed infuriated by the need to ask.

"Half mortal, half immortal," Aro announced to him and the rest of the guard without turning his enthralled gaze from Renesmee. "Conceived so, and carried by this newborn while she was still human."

"Impossible," Caius scoffed.

"Do you think they've fooled me, then, brother?" Aro's expression was greatly amused, but Caius flinched. "Is the heartbeat you hear a trickery as well?"

Caius scowled, looking as chagrined as if Aro's gentle questions had been blows.

"Calmly and carefully, brother," Aro cautioned, still smiling at Renesmee. "I know well how you love your justice, but there is no justice in acting against this unique little one for her parentage. And so much to learn, so much to learn! I know you don't have my enthusiasm for collecting histories, but be tolerant with me, brother, as I add a chapter that stuns me with its improbability. We came expecting only justice and the sadness of false friends, but look what we

have gained instead! A new, bright knowledge of ourselves, our possibilities."

He held out his hand to Renesmee in invitation. But this was not what she wanted. She leaned away from me, stretching upward, to touch her fingertips to Aro's face. Aro did not react with shock as almost everyone else had reacted to this performance from Renesmee; he was as used to the flow of thought and memory from other minds as Edward was.

His smile widened, and he sighed in satisfaction. "Brilliant," he whispered. Renesmee relaxed back into my arms, her little face very serious.

"Please?" she asked him.

His smile turned gentle. "Of course I have no desire to harm your loved ones, precious Renesmee."

Aro's voice was so comforting and affectionate, it took me in for a second. And then I heard Edward's teeth grind together and, far behind us, Maggie's outraged hiss at the lie.

"I wonder," Aro said thoughtfully, seeming unaware of the reaction to his previous words. His eyes moved unexpectedly to Jacob, and instead of the disgust the other Volturi viewed the giant wolf with, Aro's eyes were filled with a longing that I did not comprehend.

"It doesn't work that way," Edward said, the careful neutrality gone from his suddenly harsh tone.

"Just an errant thought," Aro said, appraising Jacob openly, and then his eyes moved slowly across the two lines of werewolves behind us. Whatever

Renesmee had shown him, it made the wolves suddenly interesting to him.

“They don’t belong to us, Aro. They don’t follow our commands that way. They’re here because they want to be.”

Jacob growled menacingly.

“They seem quite attached to you, though,” Aro said. “And your young mate and your… family. Loyal.” His voice caressed the word softly.

“They’re committed to protecting human life, Aro. That makes them able to coexist with us, but hardly with you. Unless you’re rethinking your lifestyle.”

Aro laughed merrily. “Just an errant thought,” he repeated. “You well know how that is. We none of us can entirely control our subconscious desires.”

Edward grimaced. “I do know how that is. And I also know the difference between that kind of thought and the kind with a purpose behind it. It could never work, Aro.”

Jacob’s vast head turned in Edward’s direction, and a faint whine slipped from between his teeth.

“He’s intrigued with the idea of… guard dogs,” Edward murmured back. There was one second of dead silence, and then the sound of the furious snarls ripping from the entire pack filled the giant clearing.

There was a sharp bark of command—from Sam, I guessed, though I didn’t turn to look

—and the complaint broke off into ominous quiet.

“I suppose that answers that question,” Aro said, laughing again. “This lot has picked its side.”

Edward hissed and leaned forward. I clutched at his arm, wondering what could be in Aro’s thoughts that would make him react so violently, while Felix and Demetri slipped into crouches in synchronization. Aro waved them off again. They all returned to their former posture, Edward included.

“So much to discuss,” Aro said, his tone suddenly that of an inundated businessman.

“So much to decide. If you and your furry protector will excuse me, my dear Cullens, I must confer with my brothers.”

# Chapter 37

## CONTRIVANCES

Aro did not rejoin his anxious guard waiting on the north side of the clearing; instead, he waved them forward.

Edward started backing up immediately, pulling my arm and Emmett's. We hurried backward, keeping our eyes on the advancing threat. Jacob retreated slowest, the fur on his shoulders standing straight up as he bared his fangs at Aro. Renesmee grabbed the end of his tail as we retreated; she held it like a leash, forcing him to stay with us. We reached our family at the same time that the dark cloaks surrounded Aro again. Now there were only fifty yards between them and us—a distance any of us could leap in just a fraction of a second.

Caius began arguing with Aro at once.

"How can you abide this infamy? Why do we stand here impotently in the face of such an outrageous crime, covered by such a ridiculous deception?" He held his arms rigidly at his sides, his hands curled into claws. I wondered why he did not just touch Aro to share his opinion. Were we seeing a division in their ranks already? Could we be that lucky?

"Because it's all true," Aro told him calmly. "Every word of it. See how many witnesses stand ready to give evidence that they have seen this miraculous child grow and mature in just the short time they've known her. That they have felt the warmth of the

blood that pulses in her veins." Aro's gesture swept from Amun on one side across to Siobhan on the other.

Caius reacted oddly to Aro's soothing words, starting ever so slightly at the mention of witnesses. The anger drained from his features, replaced by a cold calculation. He glanced at the Volturi witnesses with an expression that looked vaguely… nervous. I glanced at the angry mob, too, and saw immediately that the description no longer applied. The frenzy for action had turned to confusion. Whispered conversations seethed through the crowd as they tried to make sense of what had happened. Caius was frowning, deep in thought. His speculative expression stoked the flames of my smoldering anger at the same time that it worried me. What if the guard acted again on some invisible signal, as they had in their march? Anxiously, I inspected my shield; it felt just as impenetrable as before. I flexed it now into a low, wide dome that arced over our company.

I could feel the sharp plumes of light where my family and friends stood—each one an individual flavor that I thought I would be able to recognize with practice. I already knew Edward's—his was the very brightest of them all. The extra empty space around the shining spots bothered me; there was no physical barrier to the shield, and if any of the talented Volturi got under it, it would protect no one but me. I felt my forehead crease as I pulled the elastic armor very carefully closer. Carlisle was the farthest forward; I sucked the shield back inch by inch, trying to wrap it as exactly to his body as I could.

My shield seemed to want to cooperate. It hugged his shape; when Carlisle shifted to the side to stand nearer to Tanya, the elastic stretched with him, drawn to his spark. Fascinated, I tugged in more threads of the fabric, pulling it around each glimmering shape that was a friend or ally. The shield clung to them willingly, moving as they moved.

Only a second had passed; Caius was still deliberating.

“The werewolves,” he murmured at last.

With sudden panic, I realized that most of the werewolves were unprotected. I was about to reach out to them when I realize that, strangely, I could still feel their sparks. Curious, I drew the shield tighter in, until Amun and Kebi—the farthest edge of our group—were outside with the wolves. Once they were on the other side, their lights vanished. They no longer existed to that new sense. But the wolves were still bright flames—or rather, half of them were. Hmm… I edged outward again, and as soon as Sam was under cover, all the wolves were brilliant sparks again. Their minds must have been more interconnected than I’d imagined. If the Alpha was inside my shield, the rest of their minds were every bit as protected as his.

“Ah, brother…,” Aro answered Caius’s statement with a pained look.

“Will you defend that alliance, too, Aro?” Caius demanded. “The Children of the Moon have been our bitter enemies from the dawn of time. We have hunted them to near extinction in Europe and Asia.

Yet Carlisle encourages a familiar relationship with this enormous infestation—no doubt in an attempt to overthrow us. The better to protect his warped lifestyle."

Edward cleared his throat loudly and Caius glared at him. Aro placed one thin, delicate hand over his own face as if he was embarrassed for the other ancient.

"Caius, it's the middle of the day," Edward pointed out. He gestured to Jacob. "These are not Children of the Moon, clearly. They bear no relation to your enemies on the other side of the world."

"You breed mutants here," Caius spit back at him.

Edward's jaw clenched and unclenched, then he answered evenly, "They aren't even werewolves. Aro can tell you all about it if you don't believe me."

Not werewolves? I shot a mystified look at Jacob. He lifted his huge shoulders and let them drop—a shrug. He didn't know what Edward was talking about, either.

"Dear Caius, I would have warned you not to press this point if you had told me your thoughts," Aro murmured. "Though the creatures think of themselves as werewolves, they are not. The more accurate name for them would be shape-shifters. The choice of a wolf form was purely chance. It could have been a bear or a hawk or a panther when the first change was made. These creatures truly have nothing to do with the Children of the Moon. They have merely inherited this skill from their fathers. It's

genetic—they do not continue their species by infecting others the way true werewolves do.”

Caius glared at Aro with irritation and something more—an accusation of betrayal, maybe.

“They know our secret,” he said flatly.

Edward looked about to answer this accusation, but Aro spoke faster. “They are creatures of our supernatural world, brother. Perhaps even more dependent upon secrecy than we are; they can hardly expose us. Carefully, Caius. Specious allegations get us nowhere.”

Caius took a deep breath and nodded. They exchanged a long, significant glance. I thought I understood the instruction behind Aro’s careful wording. False charges weren’t helping convince the watching witnesses on either side; Aro was cautioning Caius to move on to the next strategy. I wondered if the reason behind the apparent strain between the two ancients—Caius’s unwillingness to share his thoughts with a touch—was that Caius didn’t care about the show as much as Aro did. If the coming slaughter was so much more essential to Caius than an untarnished reputation.

“I want to talk to the informant,” Caius announced abruptly, and turned his glare on Irina.

Irina wasn’t paying attention to Caius and Aro’s conversation; her face was twisted in agony, her eyes locked on her sisters, lined up to die. It was clear on her face that she knew now her accusation had been totally false.

"Irina," Caius barked, unhappy to have to address her.

She looked up, startled and instantly afraid.

Caius snapped his fingers.

Hesitantly, she moved from the fringes of the Volturi formation to stand in front of Caius again.

"So you appear to have been quite mistaken in your allegations," Caius began. Tanya and Kate leaned forward anxiously.

"I'm sorry," Irina whispered. "I should have made sure of what I was seeing. But I had no idea. . . ." She gestured helplessly in our direction.

"Dear Caius, could you expect her to have guessed in an instant something so strange and impossible?" Aro asked. "Any of us would have made the same assumption."

Caius flicked his fingers at Aro to silence him.

"We all know you made a mistake," he said brusquely. "I meant to speak of your motivations."

Irina waited nervously for him to continue, and then repeated, "My motivations?"

"Yes, for coming to spy on them in the first place."

Irina flinched at the word spy.

"You were unhappy with the Cullens, were you not?"

She turned her miserable eyes to Carlisle's face. "I was," she admitted.

“Because… ?” Caius prompted.

“Because the werewolves killed my friend,” she whispered. “And the Cullens wouldn’t stand aside to let me avenge him.”

“The shape-shifters,” Aro corrected quietly.

“So the Cullens sided with the shape-shifters against our own kind—against the friend of a friend, even,” Caius summarized.

I heard Edward make a disgusted sound under his breath. Caius was ticking down his list, looking for an accusation that would stick.

Irina’s shoulders stiffened. “That’s how I saw it.”

Caius waited again and then prompted, “If you’d like to make a formal complaint against the shape-shifters—and the Cullens for supporting their actions—now would be the time.” He smiled a tiny cruel smile, waiting for Irina to give him his next excuse. Maybe Caius didn’t understand real families—relationships based on love rather than just the love of power. Maybe he overestimated the potency of vengeance. Irina’s jaw jerked up, her shoulders squared.

“No, I have no complaint against the wolves, or the Cullens. You came here today to destroy an immortal child. No immortal child exists. This was my mistake, and I take full responsibility for it. But the Cullens are innocent, and you have no reason to still be here. I’m so sorry,” she said to us, and then she turned her face toward the Volturi witnesses. “There was no

crime. There's no valid reason for you to continue here."

Caius raised his hand as she spoke, and in it was a strange metal object, carved and ornate.

This was a signal. The response was so fast that we all stared in stunned disbelief while it happened. Before there was time to react, it was over.

Three of the Volturi soldiers leaped forward, and Irina was completely obscured by their gray cloaks. In the same instant, a horrible metallic screeching ripped through the clearing. Caius slithered into the center of the gray melee, and the shocking squealing sound exploded into a startling upward shower of sparks and tongues of flame. The soldiers leaped back from the sudden inferno, immediately retaking their places in the guard's perfectly straight line.

Caius stood alone beside the blazing remains of Irina, the metal object in his hand still throwing a thick jet of flame into the pyre.

With a small clicking sound, the fire shooting from Caius's hand disappeared. A gasp rippled through the mass of witnesses behind the Volturi.

We were too aghast to make any noise at all. It was one thing to know that death was coming with fierce, unstoppable speed; it was another thing to watch it happen. Caius smiled coldly. "Now she has taken full responsibility for her actions."

His eyes flashed to our front line, touching swiftly on Tanya's and Kate's frozen forms. In that second I

understood that Caius had never underestimated the ties of a true family. This was the ploy. He had not wanted Irina's complaint; he had wanted her defiance. His excuse to destroy her, to ignite the violence that filled the air like a thick, combustible mist. He had thrown a match.

The strained peace of this summit already teetered more precariously than an elephant on a tightrope. Once the fight began, there would be no way to stop it. It would only escalate until one side was entirely extinct. Our side. Caius knew this. So did Edward.

"Stop them!" Edward cried out, jumping to grab Tanya's arm as she lurched forward toward the smiling Caius with a maddened cry of pure rage. She couldn't shake Edward off before Carlisle had his arms locked around her waist.

"It's too late to help her," he reasoned urgently as she struggled. "Don't give him what he wants!"

Kate was harder to contain. Shrieking wordlessly like Tanya, she broke into the first stride of the attack that would end with everyone's death. Rosalie was closest to her, but before Rose could clinch her in a headlock, Kate shocked her so violently that Rose crumpled to the ground. Emmett caught Kate's arm and threw her down, then staggered back, his knees giving out. Kate rolled to her feet, and it looked like no one could stop her.

Garrett flung himself at her, knocking her to the ground again. He bound his arms around hers, locking his hands around his own wrists. I saw his

body spasm as she shocked him. His eyes rolled back in his head, but his hold did not break.

“Zafrina,” Edward shouted.

Kate’s eyes went blank and her screams turned to moans. Tanya stopped struggling.

“Give me my sight back,” Tanya hissed.

Desperately, but with all the delicacy I could manage, I pulled my shield even tighter against the sparks of my friends, peeling it back carefully from Kate while trying to keep it around Garrett, making it a thin skin between them.

And then Garrett was in command of himself again, holding Kate to the snow.

“If I let you up, will you knock me down again, Katie?” he whispered. She snarled in response, still thrashing blindly.

“Listen to me, Tanya, Kate,” Carlisle said in a low but intense whisper. “Vengeance doesn’t help her now. Irina wouldn’t want you to waste your lives this way. Think about what you’re doing. If you attack them, we all die.”

Tanya’s shoulders hunched with grief, and she leaned into Carlisle for support. Kate was finally still. Carlisle and Garrett continued to console the sisters with words too urgent to sound like comfort.

And my attention returned to the weight of the stares that pressed down on our moment of chaos. From the corners of my eyes, I could see that Edward and

everyone else besides Carlisle and Garrett were on their guard again as well. The heaviest glare came from Caius, staring with enraged disbelief at Kate and Garrett in the snow. Aro was watching the same two, incredulity the strongest emotion on his face. He knew what Kate could do. He had felt her potency through Edward's memories.

Did he understand what was happening now—did he see that my shield had grown in strength and subtlety far beyond what Edward knew me to be capable of? Or did he think Garrett had learned his own form of immunity?

The Volturi guard no longer stood at disciplined attention—they were crouched forward, waiting to spring the counterstrike the moment we attacked.

Behind them, forty-three witnesses watched with very different expressions than the ones they'd worn entering the clearing. Confusion had turned to suspicion. The lightning-fast destruction of Irina had shaken them all. What had been her crime?

Without the immediate attack that Caius had counted on to distract from his rash act, the Volturi witnesses were left questioning exactly what was going on here. Aro glanced back swiftly while I watched, his face betraying him with one flash of vexation. His need for an audience had backfired badly.

I heard Stefan and Vladimir murmur to each other in quiet glee at Aro's discomfort. Aro was obviously concerned with keeping his white hat, as the Romanians had put it. But I didn't believe that the Volturi would leave us in peace just to save their

reputation. After they finished with us, surely they would slaughter their witnesses for that purpose. I felt a strange, sudden pity for the mass of the strangers the Volturi had brought to watch us die. Demetri would hunt them until they were extinct, too. For Jacob and Renesmee, for Alice and Jasper, for Alistair, and for these strangers who had not known what today would cost them, Demetri had to die.

Aro touched Caius's shoulder lightly. "Irina has been punished for bearing false witness against this child." So that was to be their excuse. He went on. "Perhaps we should return to the matter at hand?"

Caius straightened, and his expression hardened into unreadability. He stared forward, seeing nothing. His face reminded me, oddly, of a person who'd just learned he'd been demoted.

Aro drifted forward, Renata, Felix, and Demetri automatically moving with him.

"Just to be thorough," he said, "I'd like to speak with a few of your witnesses. Procedure, you know." He waved a hand dismissively.

Two things happened at once. Caius's eyes focused on Aro, and the tiny cruel smile came back. And Edward hissed, his hands balling up in fists so tight it looked like the bones in his knuckles would split through his diamond-hard skin. I was desperate to ask him what was going on, but Aro was close enough to hear even the quietest breath. I saw Carlisle glance anxiously at Edward's face, and then his own face hardened.

While Caius had blundered through useless accusations and injudicious attempts to trigger the fight, Aro must have been coming up with a more effective strategy. Aro ghosted across the snow to the far western end of our line, stopping about ten yards from Amun and Kebi. The nearby wolves bristled angrily but held their positions.

“Ah, Amun, my southern neighbor!” Aro said warmly. “It has been so long since you’ve visited me.”

Amun was motionless with anxiety, Kebi a statue at his side. “Time means little; I never notice its passing,” Amun said through unmoving lips.

“So true,” Aro agreed. “But maybe you had another reason to stay away?”

Amun said nothing.

“It can be terribly time-consuming to organize newcomers into a coven. I know that well! I’m grateful I have others to deal with the tedium. I’m glad your new additions have fit in so well. I would have loved to have been introduced. I’m sure you were meaning to come to see me soon.”

“Of course,” Amun said, his tone so emotionless that it was impossible to tell if there was any fear or sarcasm in his assent.

“Oh well, we’re all together now! Isn’t it lovely?”

Amun nodded, his face blank.

"But the reason for your presence here is not as pleasant, unfortunately. Carlisle called on you to witness?"

"Yes."

"And what did you witness for him?"

Amun spoke with the same cold lack of emotion. "I've observed the child in question. It was evident almost immediately that she was not an immortal child—"

"Perhaps we should define our terminology," Aro interrupted, "now that there seem to be new classifications. By immortal child, you mean of course a human child who had been bitten and thus transformed into a vampire."

"Yes, that's what I meant."

"What else did you observe about the child?"

"The same things that you surely saw in Edward's mind. That the child is his biologically. That she grows. That she learns."

"Yes, yes," Aro said, a hint of impatience in his otherwise amiable tone. "But specifically in your few weeks here, what did you see?"

Amun's brow furrowed. "That she grows… quickly."

Aro smiled. "And do you believe that she should be allowed to live?"

A hiss escaped my lips, and I was not alone. Half the vampires in our line echoed my protest. The sound was a low sizzle of fury hanging in the air. Across the

meadow, a few of the Volturi witnesses made the same noise. Edward stepped back and wrapped a restraining hand around my wrist.

Aro did not turn to the noise, but Amun glanced around uneasily.

"I did not come to make judgments," he equivocated.

Aro laughed lightly. "Just your opinion."

Amun's chin lifted. "I see no danger in the child. She learns even more swiftly than she grows."

Aro nodded, considering. After a moment, he turned away.

"Aro?" Amun called.

Aro whirled back. "Yes, friend?"

"I gave my witness. I have no more business here. My mate and I would like to take our leave now."

Aro smiled warmly. "Of course. I'm so glad we were able to chat for a bit. And I'm sure we'll see each other again soon."

Amun's lips were a tight line as he inclined his head once, acknowledging the barely concealed threat. He touched Kebi's arm, and then the two of them ran quickly to the southern edge of the meadow and disappeared into the trees. I knew they wouldn't stop running for a very long time.

Aro was gliding back along the length of our line to the east, his guards hovering tensely. He stopped when he was in front of Siobhan's massive form.

"Hello, dear Siobhan. You are as lovely as ever."

Siobhan inclined her head, waiting.

"And you?" he asked. "Would you answer my questions the same way Amun has?"

"I would," Siobhan said. "But I would perhaps add a little more. Renesmee understands the limitations. She's no danger to humans—she blends in better than we do. She poses no threat of exposure."

"Can you think of none?" Aro asked soberly.

Edward growled, a low ripping sound deep in his throat.

Caius's cloudy crimson eyes brightened.

Renata reached out protectively toward her master.

And Garrett freed Kate to take a step forward, ignoring Kate's hand as she tried to caution him this time.

Siobhan answered slowly, "I don't think I follow you."

Aro drifted lightly back, casually, but toward the rest of his guard. Renata, Felix, and Demetri were closer than his shadow.

"There is no broken law," Aro said in a placating voice, but every one of us could hear that a qualification was coming. I fought back the rage that tried to claw its way up my throat and snarl out my defiance. I hurled the fury into my shield, thickening it, making sure everyone was protected.

“No broken law,” Aro repeated. “However, does it follow then that there is no danger?

No.” He shook his head gently. “That is a separate issue.”

The only response was the tightening of already stretched nerves, and Maggie, at the fringes of our band of fighters, shaking her head with slow anger. Aro paced thoughtfully, looking as if he floated rather than touched the ground with his feet. I noticed every pass took him closer to the protection of his guard.

“She is unique… utterly, impossibly unique. Such a waste it would be, to destroy something so lovely. Especially when we could learn so much . . .” He sighed, as if unwilling to go on. “But there is danger, danger that cannot simply be ignored.”

No one answered his assertion. It was dead silent as he continued in a monologue that sounded as if he spoke it for himself only.

“How ironic it is that as the humans advance, as their faith in science grows and controls their world, the more free we are from discovery. Yet, as we become ever more uninhibited by their disbelief in the supernatural, they become strong enough in their technologies that, if they wished, they could actually pose a threat to us, even destroy some of us.

“For thousands and thousands of years, our secrecy has been more a matter of convenience, of ease, than of actual safety. This last raw, angry century has given birth to weapons of such power that they endanger even immortals. Now our status as mere

myth in truth protects us from these weak creatures we hunt.

“This amazing child”—he lifted his hand palm down as if to rest it on Renesmee, though he was forty yards from her now, almost within the Volturi formation again—“if we could but know her potential—know with absolute certainty that she could always remain shrouded within the obscurity that protects us. But we know nothing of what she will become! Her own parents are plagued by fears of her future. We cannot know what she will grow to be.” He paused, looking first at our witnesses, and then, meaningfully, at his own. His voice gave a good imitation of sounding torn by his words. Still looking at his own witnesses, he spoke again. “Only the known is safe. Only the known is tolerable. The unknown is… a vulnerability.”

Caius’s smile widened viciously.

“You’re reaching, Aro,” Carlisle said in a bleak voice.

“Peace, friend.” Aro smiled, his face as kind, his voice as gentle, as ever. “Let us not be hasty. Let us look at this from every side.”

“May I offer a side to be considered?” Garrett petitioned in a level tone, taking another step forward.

“Nomad,” Aro said, nodding in permission.

Garrett’s chin lifted. His eyes focused on the huddled mass at the end of the meadow, and he spoke directly to the Volturi witnesses.

"I came here at Carlisle's request, as the others, to witness," he said. "That is certainly no longer necessary, with regard to the child. We all see what she is.

"I stayed to witness something else. You." He jabbed his finger toward the wary vampires. "Two of you I know—Makenna, Charles—and I can see that many of you others are also wanderers, roamers like myself. Answering to none. Think carefully on what I tell you now.

"These ancient ones did not come here for justice as they told you. We suspected as much, and now it has been proved. They came, misled, but with a valid excuse for their action. Witness now as they seek flimsy excuses to continue their true mission. Witness them struggle to find a justification for their true purpose—to destroy this family here."

He gestured toward Carlisle and Tanya.

"The Volturi come to erase what they perceive as the competition. Perhaps, like me, you look at this clan's golden eyes and marvel. They are difficult to understand, it's true. But the ancient ones look and see something besides their strange choice. They see power.

"I have witnessed the bonds within this family—I say family and not coven. These strange golden-eyed ones deny their very natures. But in return have they found something worth even more, perhaps, than mere gratification of desire? I've made a little study of them in my time here, and it seems to me that intrinsic to this intense family binding—that which

makes them possible at all—is the peaceful character of this life of sacrifice. There is no aggression here like we all saw in the large southern clans that grew and diminished so quickly in their wild feuds. There is no thought for domination. And Aro knows this better than I do."

I watched Aro's face as Garrett's words condemned him, waiting tensely for some response. But Aro's face was only politely amused, as if waiting for a tantrum-throwing child to realize that no one was paying attention to his histrionics.

"Carlisle assured us all, when he told us what was coming, that he did not call us here to fight. These witnesses"—Garrett pointed to Siobhan and Liam—"agreed to give evidence, to slow the Volturi advance with their presence so that Carlisle would get the chance to present his case.

"But some of us wondered"—his eyes flashed to Eleazar's face—"if Carlisle having truth on his side would be enough to stop the so-called justice. Are the Volturi here to protect the safety of our secrecy, or to protect their own power? Did they come to destroy an illegal creation, or a way of life? Could they be satisfied when the danger turned out to be no more than a misunderstanding? Or would they push the issue without the excuse of justice?

"We have the answer to all these questions. We heard it in Aro's lying words—we have one with a gift of knowing such things for certain—and we see it now in Caius's eager smile. Their guard is just a mindless weapon, a tool in their masters' quest for domination.

“So now there are more questions, questions that you must answer. Who rules you, nomads? Do you answer to someone’s will besides your own? Are you free to choose your path, or will the Volturi decide how you will live?

“I came to witness. I stay to fight. The Volturi care nothing for the death of the child. They seek the death of our free will.”

He turned, then, to face the ancients. “So come, I say! Let’s hear no more lying rationalizations. Be honest in your intents as we will be honest in ours. We will defend our freedom. You will or will not attack it. Choose now, and let these witnesses see the true issue debated here.”

Once more he looked to the Volturi witnesses, his eyes probing each face. The power of his words was evident in their expressions. “You might consider joining us. If you think the Volturi will let you live to tell this tale, you are mistaken. We may all be destroyed”—he shrugged—“but then again, maybe not. Perhaps we are on more equal footing than they know. Perhaps the Volturi have finally met their match. I promise you this, though—if we fall, so do you.”

He ended his heated speech by stepping back to Kate’s side and then sliding forward in a half-crouch, prepared for the onslaught.

Aro smiled. “A very pretty speech, my revolutionary friend.”

Garrett remained poised for attack. “Revolutionary?” he growled. “Who am I revolting against, might I ask? Are you my king? Do you wish me to call you master, too, like your sycophantic guard?”

“Peace, Garrett,” Aro said tolerantly. “I meant only to refer to your time of birth. Still a patriot, I see.”

Garrett glared back furiously.

“Let us ask our witnesses,” Aro suggested. “Let us hear their thoughts before we make our decision. Tell us, friends”—and he turned his back casually on us, moving a few yards toward his mass of nervous observers hovering even closer now to the edge of the forest—“what do you think of all this? I can assure you the child is not what we feared. Do we take the risk and let the child live? Do we put our world in jeopardy to preserve their family intact? Or does earnest Garrett have the right of it? Will you join them in a fight against our sudden quest for dominion?”

The witnesses met his gaze with careful faces. One, a small black-haired woman, looked briefly at the dark blond male at her side.

“Are those our only choices?” she asked suddenly, gaze flashing back to Aro. “Agree with you, or fight against you?”

“Of course not, most charming Makenna,” Aro said, appearing horrified that anyone could come to that conclusion. “You may go in peace, of course, as Amun did, even if you disagree with the council’s decision.”

Makenna looked at her mate's face again, and he nodded minutely.

"We did not come here for a fight." She paused, exhaled, then said, "We came here to witness. And our witness is that this condemned family is innocent. Everything that Garrett claimed is the truth."

"Ah," Aro said sadly. "I'm sorry you see us in that way. But such is the nature of our work."

"It is not what I see, but what I feel," Makenna's maize-haired mate spoke in a high, nervous voice. He glanced at Garrett. "Garrett said they have ways of knowing lies. I, too, know when I am hearing the truth, and when I am not." With frightened eyes he moved closer to his mate, waiting for Aro's reaction.

"Do not fear us, friend Charles. No doubt the patriot truly believes what he says," Aro chuckled lightly, and Charles's eyes narrowed.

"That is our witness," Makenna said. "We're leaving now."

She and Charles backed away slowly, not turning before they were lost from view in the trees. One other stranger began to retreat the same way, then three more darted after him.

I evaluated the thirty-seven vampires that stayed. A few of them appeared just too confused to make the decision. But the majority of them seemed only too aware of the direction this confrontation had taken. I

guessed that they were giving up a head start in favor of knowing exactly who would be chasing after them.

I was sure Aro saw the same thing I did. He turned away, walking back to his guard with a measured pace. He stopped in front of them and addressed them in a clear voice.

“We are outnumbered, dearest ones,” he said. “We can expect no outside help. Should we leave this question undecided to save ourselves?”

“No, master,” they whispered in unison.

“Is the protection of our world worth perhaps the loss of some of our number?”

“Yes,” they breathed. “We are not afraid.”

Aro smiled and turned to his black-clad companions.

“Brothers,” Aro said somberly, “there is much to consider here.”

“Let us counsel,” Caius said eagerly.

“Let us counsel,” Marcus repeated in an uninterested tone.

Aro turned his back to us again, facing the other ancients. They joined hands to form a black-shrouded triangle.

As soon as Aro’s attention was engaged in the silent counsel, two more of their witnesses disappeared silently into the forest. I hoped, for their sakes, that they were fast.

This was it. Carefully, I loosened Renesmee's arms from my neck.

"You remember what I told you?"

Tears welled in her eyes, but she nodded. "I love you," she whispered. Edward was watching us now, his topaz eyes wide. Jacob stared at us from the corner of his big dark eye.

"I love you, too," I said, and then I touched her locket. "More than my own life." I kissed her forehead.

Jacob whined uneasily.

I stretched up on my toes and whispered into his ear. "Wait until they're totally distracted, then run with her. Get as far from this place as you possibly can. When you've gone as far as you can on foot, she has what you need to get you in the air."

Edward's and Jacob's faces were almost identical masks of horror, despite the fact that one of them was an animal.

Renesmee reached for Edward, and he took her in his arms. They hugged each other tightly.

"This is what you kept from me?" he whispered over her head.

"From Aro," I breathed.

"Alice?"

I nodded.

His face twisted with understanding and pain. Had that been the expression on my face when I'd finally put together Alice's clues?

Jacob was growling quietly, a low rasp that was as even and unbroken as a purr. His hackles were stiff and his teeth exposed.

Edward kissed Renesmee's forehead and both her cheeks, then he lifted her to Jacob's shoulder. She scrambled agilely onto his back, pulling herself into place with handfuls of his fur, and fit herself easily into the dip between his massive shoulder blades. Jacob turned to me, his expressive eyes full of agony, the rumbling growl still grating through his chest.

"You're the only one we could ever trust her with," I murmured to him. "If you didn't love her so much, I could never bear this. I know you can protect her, Jacob."

He whined again, and dipped his head to butt it against my shoulder.

"I know," I whispered. "I love you, too, Jake. You'll always be my best man."

A tear the size of a baseball rolled into the russet fur beneath his eye. Edward leaned his head against the same shoulder where he'd placed Renesmee.

"Goodbye, Jacob, my brother… my son."

The others were not oblivious to the farewell scene. Their eyes were locked on the silent black triangle, but I could tell they were listening.

“Is there no hope, then?” Carlisle whispered. There was no fear in his voice. Just determination and acceptance.

“There is absolutely hope,” I murmured back. It could be true, I told myself. “I only know my own fate.”

Edward took my hand. He knew that he was included. When I said my fate, there was no question that I meant the two of us. We were just halves of the whole. Esme’s breath was ragged behind me. She moved past us, touching our faces as she passed, to stand beside Carlisle and hold his hand.

Suddenly, we were surrounded by murmured goodbyes and I love you’s.

“If we live through this,” Garrett whispered to Kate, “I’ll follow you anywhere, woman.”

“Now he tells me,” she muttered.

Rosalie and Emmett kissed quickly but passionately.

Tia caressed Benjamin’s face. He smiled back cheerfully, catching her hand and holding it against his cheek.

I didn’t see all the expressions of love and pain. I was distracted by a sudden fluttering pressure against the outside of my shield. I couldn’t tell where it came from, but it felt like it was directed at the edges of our group, Siobhan and Liam particularly. The pressure did no damage, and then it was gone.

There was no change in the silent, still forms of the counseling ancients. But perhaps there was some signal I'd missed.

"Get ready," I whispered to the others. "It's starting."

# Chapter 38

## POWER

“Chelsea is trying to break our bindings,” Edward whispered. “But she can’t find them. She can’t feel us here. . . .” His eyes cut to me. “Are you doing that?”

I smiled grimly at him. “I am all over this.”

Edward lurched away from me suddenly, his hand reaching out toward Carlisle. At the same time, I felt a much sharper jab against the shield where it wrapped protectively around Carlisle’s light. It wasn’t painful, but it wasn’t pleasant, either.

“Carlisle? Are you all right?” Edward gasped frantically.

“Yes. Why?”

“Jane,” Edward answered.

The moment that he said her name, a dozen pointed attacks hit in a second, stabbing all over the elastic shield, aimed at twelve different bright spots. I flexed, making sure the shield was undamaged. It didn’t seem like Jane had been able to pierce it. I glanced around quickly; everyone was fine.

“Incredible,” Edward said.

“Why aren’t they waiting for the decision?” Tanya hissed.

"Normal procedure," Edward answered brusquely. "They usually incapacitate those on trial so they can't escape."

I looked across at Jane, who was staring at our group with furious disbelief. I was pretty sure that, besides me, she'd never seen anyone remain standing through her fiery assault.

It probably wasn't very mature. But I figured it would take Aro about half a second to guess—if he hadn't already—that my shield was more powerful than Edward had known; I already had a big target on my forehead and there was really no point in trying to keep the extent of what I could do a secret. So I grinned a huge, smug smile right at Jane.

Her eyes narrowed, and I felt another stab of pressure, this time directed at me. I pulled my lips wider, showing my teeth.

Jane let out a high-pitched scream of a snarl. Everyone jumped, even the disciplined guard. Everyone but the ancients, who didn't so much as look up from their conference. Her twin caught her arm as she crouched to spring.

The Romanians started chuckling with dark anticipation.

"I told you this was our time," Vladimir said to Stefan.

"Just look at the witch's face," Stefan chortled.

Alec patted his sister's shoulder soothingly, then tucked her under his arm. He turned his face to us, perfectly smooth, completely angelic.

I waited for some pressure, some sign of his attack, but I felt nothing. He continued to stare in our direction, his pretty face composed. Was he attacking? Was he getting through my shield? Was I the only one who could still see him? I clutched at Edward's hand.

"Are you okay?" I choked out.

"Yes," he whispered.

"Is Alec trying?"

Edward nodded. "His gift is slower than Jane's. It creeps. It will touch us in a few seconds."

I saw it then, when I had a clue of what to look for.

A strange clear haze was oozing across the snow, nearly invisible against the white. It reminded me of a mirage—a slight warping of the view, a hint of a shimmer. I pushed my shield out from Carlisle and the rest of the front line, afraid to have the slinking mist too close when it hit. What if it stole right through my intangible protection? Should we run?

A low rumbling murmured through the ground under our feet, and a gust of wind blew the snow into sudden flurries between our position and the Volturi's. Benjamin had seen the creeping threat, too, and now he tried to blow the mist away from us. The snow made it easy to see where he threw the wind, but the mist didn't react in any way. It was like air blowing harmlessly through a shadow; the shadow was immune. The triangular formation of the ancients finally broke apart when, with a racking groan, a

deep, narrow fissure opened in a long zigzag across the middle of the clearing. The earth rocked under my feet for a moment. The drifts of snow plummeted into the hole, but the mist skipped right across it, as untouched by gravity as it had been by wind. Aro and Caius watched the opening earth with wide eyes. Marcus looked in the same direction without emotion.

They didn't speak; they waited, too, as the mist approached us. The wind shrieked louder but didn't change the course of the mist. Jane was smiling now. And then the mist hit a wall.

I could taste it as soon as it touched my shield—it had a dense, sweet, cloying flavor. It made me remember dimly the numbness of Novocain on my tongue.

The mist curled upward, seeking a breach, a weakness. It found none. The fingers of searching haze twisted upward and around, trying to find a way in, and in the process illustrating the astonishing size of the protective screen.

There were gasps on both sides of Benjamin's gorge.

"Well done, Bella!" Benjamin cheered in a low voice.

My smile returned.

I could see Alec's narrowed eyes, doubt on his face for the first time as his mist swirled harmlessly around the edges of my shield.

And then I knew that I could do this. Obviously, I would be the number-one priority, the first one to die, but as long as I held, we were on more than equal

footing with the Volturi. We still had Benjamin and Zafrina; they had no supernatural help at all. As long as I held.

“I’m going to have to concentrate,” I whispered to Edward. “When it comes to hand to hand, it’s going to be harder to keep the shield around the right people.”

“I’ll keep them off you.”

“No. You have to get to Demetri. Zafrina will keep them away from me.”

Zafrina nodded solemnly. “No one will touch this young one,” she promised Edward.

“I’d go after Jane and Alec myself, but I can do more good here.”

“Jane’s mine,” Kate hissed. “She needs a taste of her own medicine.”

“And Alec owes me many lives, but I will settle for his,” Vladimir growled from the other side. “He’s mine.”

“I just want Caius,” Tanya said evenly.

The others started divvying up opponents, too, but they were quickly interrupted. Aro, staring calmly at Alec’s ineffective mist, finally spoke.

“Before we vote,” he began.

I shook my head angrily. I was tired of this charade. The bloodlust was igniting in me again, and I was sorry that I would help the others more by standing still. I wanted to fight.

"Let me remind you," Aro continued, "whatever the council's decision, there need be no violence here."

Edward snarled out a dark laugh.

Aro stared at him sadly. "It will be a regrettable waste to our kind to lose any of you. But you especially, young Edward, and your newborn mate. The Volturi would be glad to welcome many of you into our ranks. Bella, Benjamin, Zafrina, Kate. There are many choices before you. Consider them."

Chelsea's attempt to sway us fluttered impotently against my shield. Aro's gaze swept across our hard eyes, looking for any indication of hesitation. From his expression, he found none.

I knew he was desperate to keep Edward and me, to imprison us the way he had hoped to enslave Alice. But this fight was too big. He would not win if I lived. I was fiercely glad to be so powerful that I left him no way not to kill me.

"Let us vote, then," he said with apparent reluctance.

Caius spoke with eager haste. "The child is an unknown quantity. There is no reason to allow such a risk to exist. It must be destroyed, along with all who protect it." He smiled in expectation.

I fought back a shriek of defiance to answer his cruel smirk.

Marcus lifted his uncaring eyes, seeming to look through us as he voted.

"I see no immediate danger. The child is safe enough for now. We can always reevaluate later. Let us leave in peace." His voice was even fainter than his brothers' feathery sighs. None of the guard relaxed their ready positions at his disagreeing words. Caius's anticipatory grin did not falter. It was as if Marcus hadn't spoken at all.

"I must make the deciding vote, it seems," Aro mused.

Suddenly, Edward stiffened at my side. "Yes!" he hissed.

I risked a glance at him. His face glowed with an expression of triumph that I didn't understand—it was the expression an angel of destruction might wear while the world burned. Beautiful and terrifying.

There was a low reaction from the guard, an uneasy murmur.

"Aro?" Edward called, nearly shouted, undisguised victory in his voice. Aro hesitated for a second, assessing this new mood warily before he answered. "Yes, Edward? You have something further… ?"

"Perhaps," Edward said pleasantly, controlling his unexplained excitement. "First, if I could clarify one point?"

"Certainly," Aro said, raising his eyebrows, nothing now but polite interest in his tone. My teeth ground together; Aro was never more dangerous than when he was gracious.

"The danger you foresee from my daughter—this stems entirely from our inability to guess how she will develop? That is the crux of the matter?"

"Yes, friend Edward," Aro agreed. "If we could but be positive… be sure that, as she grows, she will be able to stay concealed from the human world—not endanger the safety of our obscurity . . ." He trailed off, shrugging.

"So, if we could only know for sure," Edward suggested, "exactly what she will become… then there would be no need for a council at all?"

"If there was some way to be absolutely sure," Aro agreed, his feathery voice slightly more shrill. He couldn't see where Edward was leading him. Neither could I. "Then, yes, there would be no question to debate."

"And we would part in peace, good friends once again?" Edward asked with a hint of irony.

Even more shrill. "Of course, my young friend. Nothing would please me more."

Edward chuckled exultantly. "Then I do have something more to offer."

Aro's eyes narrowed. "She is absolutely unique. Her future can only be guessed at."

"Not absolutely unique," Edward disagreed. "Rare, certainly, but not one of a kind."

I fought the shock, the sudden hope springing to life, as it threatened to distract me. The sickly-looking

mist still swirled around the edges of my shield. And, as I struggled to focus, I felt again the sharp, stabbing pressure against my protective hold.

"Aro, would you ask Jane to stop attacking my wife?" Edward asked courteously. "We are still discussing evidence."

Aro raised one hand. "Peace, dear ones. Let us hear him out."

The pressure disappeared. Jane bared her teeth at me; I couldn't help grinning back at her.

"Why don't you join us, Alice?" Edward called loudly.

"Alice," Esme whispered in shock.

Alice!

Alice, Alice, Alice!

"Alice!" "Alice!" other voices murmured around me.

"Alice," Aro breathed.

Relief and violent joy surged through me. It took all my will to keep the shield where it was. Alec's mist still tested, seeking a weakness—Jane would see if I left any holes. And then I heard them running through the forest, flying, closing the distance as quickly as they could with no slowing effort at silence.

Both sides were motionless in expectation. The Volturi witnesses scowled in fresh confusion.

Then Alice danced into the clearing from the southwest, and I felt like the bliss of seeing her face

again might knock me off my feet. Jasper was only inches behind her, his sharp eyes fierce. Close after them ran three strangers; the first was a tall, muscular female with wild dark hair—obviously Kachiri. She had the same elongated limbs and features as the other Amazons, even more pronounced in her case. The next was a small olive-toned female vampire with a long braid of black hair bobbing against her back. Her deep burgundy eyes flitted nervously around the confrontation before her.

And the last was a young man… not quite as fast nor quite as fluid in his run. His skin was an impossible rich, dark brown. His wary eyes flashed across the gathering, and they were the color of warm teak. His hair was black and braided, too, like the woman's, though not as long. He was beautiful.

As he neared us, a new sound sent shock waves through the watching crowd—the sound of another heartbeat, accelerated with exertion.

Alice leaped lightly over the edges of the dissipating mist that lapped at my shield and came to a sinuous stop at Edward's side. I reached out to touch her arm, and so did Edward, Esme, Carlisle. There wasn't time for any other welcome. Jasper and the others followed her through the shield.

All the guard watched, speculation in their eyes, as the latecomers crossed the invisible border without difficulty. The brawny ones, Felix and the others like him, focused their suddenly hopeful eyes on me. They had not been sure of what my shield repelled, but it was clear now that it would not stop a physical

attack. As soon as Aro gave the order, the blitz would ensue, me the only object. I wondered how many Zafrina would be able to blind, and how much that would slow them. Long enough for Kate and Vladimir to take Jane and Alec out of the equation? That was all I could ask for. Edward, despite his absorption in the coup he was directing, stiffened furiously in response to their thoughts. He controlled himself and spoke to Aro again.

“Alice has been searching for her own witnesses these last weeks,” he said to the ancient. “And she does not come back empty-handed. Alice, why don’t you introduce the witnesses you’ve brought?”

Caius snarled. “The time for witnesses is past! Cast your vote, Aro!”

Aro raised one finger to silence his brother, his eyes glued to Alice’s face. Alice stepped forward lightly and introduced the strangers. “This is Huilen and her nephew, Nahuel.”

Hearing her voice… it was like she’d never left.

Caius’s eyes tightened as Alice named the relationship between the newcomers. The Volturi witnesses hissed amongst themselves. The vampire world was changing, and everyone could feel it.

“Speak, Huilen,” Aro commanded. “Give us the witness you were brought to bear.”

The slight woman looked to Alice nervously. Alice nodded in encouragement, and Kachiri put her long hand on the little vampire’s shoulder.

“I am Huilen,” the woman announced in clear but strangely accented English. As she continued, it was apparent she had prepared herself to tell this story, that she had practiced. It flowed like a well-known nursery rhyme. “A century and a half ago, I lived with my people, the Mapuche. My sister was Pire. Our parents named her after the snow on the mountains because of her fair skin. And she was very beautiful—too beautiful. She came to me one day in secret and told me of the angel that found her in the woods, that visited her by night. I warned her.” Huilen shook her head mournfully. “As if the bruises on her skin were not warning enough. I knew it was the Libishomen of our legends, but she would not listen. She was bewitched.

“She told me when she was sure her dark angel’s child was growing inside her. I didn’t try to discourage her from her plan to run away—I knew even our father and mother would agree that the child must be destroyed, Pire with it. I went with her into the deepest parts of the forest. She searched for her demon angel but found nothing. I cared for her, hunted for her when her strength failed. She ate the animals raw, drinking their blood. I needed no more confirmation of what she carried in her womb. I hoped to save her life before I killed the monster.

“But she loved the child inside her. She called him Nahuel, after the jungle cat, when he grew strong and broke her bones—and loved him still.

“I could not save her. The child ripped his way free of her, and she died quickly, begging all the while that I

would care for her Nahuel. Her dying wish—and I agreed.

"He bit me, though, when I tried to lift him from her body. I crawled away into the jungle to die. I didn't get far—the pain was too much. But he found me; the newborn child struggled through the underbrush to my side and waited for me. When the pain ended, he was curled against my side, sleeping.

"I cared for him until he was able to hunt for himself. We hunted the villages around our forest, staying to ourselves. We have never come so far from our home, but Nahuel wished to see the child here."

Huilen bowed her head when she was finished and moved back so she was partially hidden behind Kachiri.

Aro's lips were pursed. He stared at the dark-skinned youth.

"Nahuel, you are one hundred and fifty years old?" he questioned.

"Give or take a decade," he answered in a clear, beautifully warm voice. His accent was barely noticeable. "We don't keep track."

"And you reached maturity at what age?"

"About seven years after my birth, more or less, I was full grown."

"You have not changed since then?"

Nahuel shrugged. "Not that I've noticed."

I felt a shudder tremble through Jacob's body. I didn't want to think about this yet. I would wait till the danger was past and I could concentrate.

"And your diet?" Aro pressed, seeming interested in spite of himself.

"Mostly blood, but some human food, too. I can survive on either."

"You were able to create an immortal?" As Aro gestured to Huilen, his voice was abruptly intense. I refocused on my shield; perhaps he was seeking a new excuse.

"Yes, but none of the rest can."

A shocked murmur ran through all three groups.

Aro's eyebrows shot up. "The rest?"

"My sisters." Nahuel shrugged again.

Aro stared wildly for a moment before composing his face.

"Perhaps you would tell us the rest of your story, for there seems to be more."

Nahuel frowned.

"My father came looking for me a few years after my mother's death." His handsome face distorted slightly. "He was pleased to find me." Nahuel's tone suggested the feeling was not mutual. "He had two daughters, but no sons. He expected me to join him, as my sisters had.

"He was surprised I was not alone. My sisters are not venomous, but whether that's due to gender or a random chance… who knows? I already had my family with Huilen, and I was not interested"—he twisted the word—"in making a change. I see him from time to time. I have a new sister; she reached maturity about ten years back."

"Your father's name?" Caius asked through gritted teeth.

"Joham," Nahuel answered. "He considers himself a scientist. He thinks he's creating a new super-race." He made no attempt to disguise the disgust in his tone. Caius looked at me. "Your daughter, is she venomous?" he demanded harshly.

"No," I responded. Nahuel's head snapped up at Aro's question, and his teak eyes turned to bore into my face.

Caius looked to Aro for confirmation, but Aro was absorbed in his own thoughts. He pursed his lips and stared at Carlisle, and then Edward, and at last his eyes rested on me. Caius growled. "We take care of the aberration here, and then follow it south," he urged Aro.

Aro stared into my eyes for a long, tense moment. I had no idea what he was searching for, or what he found, but after he had measured me for that moment, something in his face changed, a faint shift in the set of his mouth and eyes, and I knew that Aro had made his decision.

"Brother," he said softly to Caius. "There appears to be no danger. This is an unusual development, but I see no threat. These half-vampire children are much like us, it appears."

"Is that your vote?" Caius demanded.

"It is."

Caius scowled. "And this Joham? This immortal so fond of experimentation?"

"Perhaps we should speak with him," Aro agreed.

"Stop Joham if you will," Nahuel said flatly. "But leave my sisters be. They are innocent."

Aro nodded, his expression solemn. And then he turned back to his guard with a warm smile.

"Dear ones," he called. "We do not fight today."

The guard nodded in unison and straightened out of their ready positions. The mist dissipated swiftly, but I held my shield in place. Maybe this was another trick. I analyzed their expressions as Aro turned back to us. His face was as benign as ever, but unlike before, I sensed a strange blankness behind the façade. As if his scheming was over. Caius was clearly incensed, but his rage was turned inward now; he was resigned. Marcus looked… bored; there really was no other word for it. The guard was impassive and disciplined again; there were no individuals among them, just the whole. They were in formation, ready to depart. The Volturi witnesses were still wary; one after another, they departed, scattering into the

woods. As their numbers dwindled, the remaining sped up. Soon they were all gone.

Aro held his hands out to us, almost apologetic. Behind him, the larger part of the guard, along with Caius, Marcus, and the silent, mysterious wives, were already drifting quickly away, their formation precise once again. Only the three that seemed to be his personal guardians lingered with him.

"I'm so glad this could be resolved without violence," he said sweetly. "My friend, Carlisle—how pleased I am to call you friend again! I hope there are no hard feelings. I know you understand the strict burden that our duty places on our shoulders."

"Leave in peace, Aro," Carlisle said stiffly. "Please remember that we still have our anonymity to protect here, and keep your guard from hunting in this region."

"Of course, Carlisle," Aro assured him. "I am sorry to earn your disapproval, my dear friend. Perhaps, in time, you will forgive me."

"Perhaps, in time, if you prove a friend to us again."

Aro bowed his head, the picture of remorse, and drifted backward for a moment before he turned around. We watched in silence as the last four Volturi disappeared into the trees.

It was very quiet. I did not drop my shield.

"Is it really over?" I whispered to Edward.

His smile was huge. “Yes. They’ve given up. Like all bullies, they’re cowards underneath the swagger.” He chuckled.

Alice laughed with him. “Seriously, people. They’re not coming back. Everybody can relax now.”

There was another beat of silence.

“Of all the rotten luck,” Stefan muttered.

And then it hit.

Cheers erupted. Deafening howls filled the clearing. Maggie pounded Siobhan on the back. Rosalie and Emmett kissed again—longer and more ardently than before. Benjamin and Tia were locked in each other’s arms, as were Carmen and Eleazar. Esme held Alice and Jasper in a tight embrace. Carlisle was warmly thanking the South American newcomers who had saved us all. Kachiri stood very close to Zafrina and Senna, their fingertips interlocked. Garrett picked Kate up off the ground and swung her around in a circle.

Stefan spit on the snow. Vladimir ground his teeth together with a sour expression. And I half-climbed the giant russet wolf to rip my daughter off his back and then crushed her to my chest. Edward’s arms were around us in the same second.

“Nessie, Nessie, Nessie,” I crooned.

Jacob laughed his big, barky laugh and poked the back of my head with his nose.

“Shut up,” I mumbled.

"I get to stay with you?" Nessie demanded.

"Forever," I promised her.

We had forever. And Nessie was going to be fine and healthy and strong. Like the halfhuman Nahuel, in a hundred and fifty years she would still be young. And we would all be together.

Happiness expanded like an explosion inside me—so extreme, so violent that I wasn't sure I'd survive it.

"Forever," Edward echoed in my ear.

I couldn't speak anymore. I lifted my head and kissed him with a passion that might possibly set the forest on fire.

I wouldn't have noticed.

# Chapter 39

## THE HAPPILY EVER AFTER

“So it was a combination of things there at the end, but what it really boiled down to was… Bella,” Edward was explaining. Our family and our two remaining guests sat in the Cullens’ great room while the forest turned black outside the tall windows. Vladimir and Stefan had vanished before we’d stopped celebrating. They were extremely disappointed in the way things had turned out, but Edward said that they’d enjoyed the Volturi’s cowardice almost enough to make up for their frustration. Benjamin and Tia were quick to follow after Amun and Kebi, anxious to let them know the outcome of the conflict; I was sure we would see them again—Benjamin and Tia, at least. None of the nomads lingered. Peter and Charlotte had a short conversation with Jasper, and then they were gone, too.

The reunited Amazons had been anxious to return home as well—they had a difficult time being away from their beloved rain forest—though they were more reluctant to leave than some of the others.

“You must bring the child to see me,” Zafrina had insisted. “Promise me, young one.”

Nessie had pressed her hand to my neck, pleading as well.

“Of course, Zafrina,” I’d agreed.

"We shall be great friends, my Nessie," the wild woman had declared before leaving with her sisters.

The Irish coven continued the exodus.

"Well done, Siobhan," Carlisle complimented her as they said goodbye.

"Ah, the power of wishful thinking," she answered sarcastically, rolling her eyes. And then she was serious. "Of course, this isn't over. The Volturi won't forgive what happened here."

Edward was the one to answer that. "They've been seriously shaken; their confidence is shattered. But, yes, I'm sure they'll recover from the blow someday. And then . . ." His eyes tightened. "I imagine they'll try to pick us off separately."

"Alice will warn us when they intend to strike," Siobhan said in a sure voice. "And we'll gather again. Perhaps the time will come when our world is ready to be free of the Volturi altogether."

"That time may come," Carlisle replied. "If it does, we'll stand together."

"Yes, my friend, we will," Siobhan agreed. "And how can we fail, when I will it otherwise?" She let out a great peal of laughter.

"Exactly," Carlisle said. He and Siobhan embraced, and then he shook Liam's hand.

"Try to find Alistair and tell him what happened. I'd hate to think of him hiding under a rock for the next decade."

Siobhan laughed again. Maggie hugged both Nessie and me, and then the Irish coven was gone.

The Denalis were the last to leave, Garrett with them—as he would be from now on, I was fairly sure. The atmosphere of celebration was too much for Tanya and Kate. They needed time to grieve for their lost sister.

Huilen and Nahuel were the ones who stayed, though I had expected those last two to go back with the Amazons. Carlisle was deep in fascinated conversation with Huilen; Nahuel sat close beside her, listening while Edward told the rest of us the story of the conflict as only he knew it.

"Alice gave Aro the excuse he needed to get out of the fight. If he hadn't been so terrified of Bella, he probably would have gone ahead with their original plan."

"Terrified?" I said skeptically. "Of me?"

He smiled at me with a look I didn't entirely recognize—it was tender, but also awed and even exasperated. "When will you ever see yourself clearly?" he said softly. Then he spoke louder, to the others as well as to me. "The Volturi haven't fought a fair fight in about twenty-five hundred years. And they've never, never fought one where they were at a disadvantage. Especially since they gained Jane and Alec, they've only been involved with unopposed slaughterings.

"You should have seen how we looked to them! Usually, Alec cuts off all sense and feeling from their

victims while they go through the charade of a counsel. That way, no one can run when the verdict is given. But there we stood, ready, waiting, outnumbering them, with gifts of our own while their gifts were rendered useless by Bella. Aro knew that with Zafrina on our side, they would be the blind ones when the battle commenced. I'm sure our numbers would have been pretty severely decimated, but they were sure that theirs would be, too. There was even a good possibility that they would lose. They've never dealt with that possibility before. They didn't deal with it well today."

"Hard to feel confident when you're surrounded by horse-sized wolves," Emmett laughed, poking Jacob's arm.

Jacob flashed a grin at him.

"It was the wolves that stopped them in the first place," I said.

"Sure was," Jacob agreed.

"Absolutely," Edward agreed. "That was another sight they've never seen. The true Children of the Moon rarely move in packs, and they are never much in control of themselves. Sixteen enormous regimented wolves was a surprise they weren't prepared for. Caius is actually terrified of werewolves. He almost lost a fight with one a few thousand years ago and never got over it."

"So there are real werewolves?" I asked. "With the full moon and silver bullets and all that?"

Jacob snorted. “Real. Does that make me imaginary?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Full moon, yes,” Edward said. “Silver bullets, no—that was just another one of those myths to make humans feel like they had a sporting chance. There aren’t very many of them left. Caius has had them hunted into near extinction.”

“And you never mentioned this because… ?”

“It never came up.”

I rolled my eyes, and Alice laughed, leaning forward—she was tucked under Edward’s other arm—to wink at me.

I glared back.

I loved her insanely, of course. But now that I’d had a chance to realize that she was really home, that her defection was only a ruse because Edward had to believe that she’d abandoned us, I was beginning to feel pretty irritated with her. Alice had some explaining to do.

Alice sighed. “Just get it off your chest, Bella.”

“How could you do that to me, Alice?”

“It was necessary.”

“Necessary!” I exploded. “You had me totally convinced that we were all going to die!

I’ve been a wreck for weeks.”

"It might have gone that way," she said calmly. "In which case you needed to be prepared to save Nessie."

Instinctively, I held Nessie—asleep now on my lap—tighter in my arms.

"But you knew there were other ways, too," I accused. "You knew there was hope. Did it ever occur to you that you could have told me everything? I know Edward had to think we were at a dead end for Aro's sake, but you could have told me."

She looked at me speculatively for a moment. "I don't think so," she said. "You're just not that good an actress."

"This was about my acting skills?"

"Oh, take it down an octave, Bella. Do you have any idea how complicated this was to set up? I couldn't even be sure that someone like Nahuel existed—all I knew was that I would be looking for something I couldn't see! Try to imagine searching for a blind spot

—not the easiest thing I've ever done. Plus we had to send back the key witnesses, like we weren't in enough of a hurry. And then keeping my eyes open all the time in case you decided to throw me any more instructions. At some point you're going to have to tell me what exactly is in Rio. Before any of that, I had to try to see every trick the Volturi might come in with and give you what few clues I could so you would be ready for their strategy, and I only had just a few hours to trace out all the possibilities. Most of all, I had to make sure you'd all believe that I was ditching out on you, because Aro had to be positive that you

had nothing left up your sleeves or he never would have committed to an out the way he did. And if you think I didn't feel like a schmuck—"

"Okay, okay!" I interrupted. "Sorry! I know it was rough for you, too. It's just that…

well, I missed you like crazy, Alice. Don't do that to me again."

Alice's trilling laugh rang through the room, and we all smiled to hear that music once more. "I missed you, too, Bella. So forgive me, and try to be satisfied with being the superhero of the day."

Everyone else laughed now, and I ducked my face into Nessie's hair, embarrassed. Edward went back to analyzing every shift of intention and control that had happened in the meadow today, declaring that it was my shield that had made the Volturi run away with their tails between their legs. The way everyone looked at me made me uncomfortable. Even Edward. It was like I had grown a hundred feet during the course of the morning. I tried to ignore the impressed looks, mostly keeping my eyes on Nessie's sleeping face and Jacob's unchanged expression. I would always be just Bella to him, and that was a relief.

The hardest stare to ignore was also the most confusing one.

It wasn't like this half-human, half-vampire Nahuel was used to thinking of me in a certain way. For all he knew, I went around routing attacking vampires every day and the scene in the meadow had been nothing unusual at all. But the boy never took his

eyes off me. Or maybe he was looking at Nessie. That made me uncomfortable, too. He couldn't be oblivious to the fact that Nessie was the only female of his kind that wasn't his half-sister.

I didn't think this idea had occurred to Jacob yet. I kind of hoped it wouldn't soon. I'd had enough fighting to last me for a while.

Eventually, the others ran out of questions for Edward, and the discussion dissolved into a bunch of smaller conversations.

I felt oddly tired. Not sleepy, of course, but just like the day had been long enough. I wanted some peace, some normality. I wanted Nessie in her own bed; I wanted the walls of my own little home around me.

I looked at Edward and felt for a moment like I could read his mind. I could see he felt exactly the same way. Ready for some peace.

"Should we take Nessie . . ."

"That's probably a good idea," he agreed quickly. "I'm sure she didn't sleep soundly last night, what with all the snoring."

He grinned at Jacob.

Jacob rolled his eyes and then yawned. "It's been a while since I slept in a bed. I bet my dad would get a kick out of having me under his roof again."

I touched his cheek. "Thank you, Jacob."

"Anytime, Bella. But you already know that."

He got up, stretched, kissed the top of Nessie's head, and then the top of mine. Finally, he punched Edward's shoulder. "See you guys tomorrow. I guess things are going to be kind of boring now, aren't they?"

"I fervently hope so," Edward said.

We got up when he was gone; I shifted my weight carefully so that Nessie was never jostled. I was deeply grateful to see her getting a sound sleep. So much weight had been on her tiny shoulders. It was time she got to be a child again—protected and secure. A few more years of childhood.

The idea of peace and security reminded me of someone who didn't have those feelings all the time.

"Oh, Jasper?" I asked as we turned for the door.

Jasper was sandwiched tight in between Alice and Esme, somehow seeming more central to the family picture than usual. "Yes, Bella?"

"I'm curious—why is J. Jenks scared stiff by just the sound of your name?"

Jasper chuckled. "It's just been my experience that some kinds of working relationships are better motivated by fear than by monetary gain."

I frowned, promising myself that I would take over that working relationship from now on and spare J the heart attack that was surely on the way.

We were kissed and hugged and wished a good night to our family. The only off note was Nahuel again,

who looked intently after us, as if he wished he could follow. Once we were across the river, we walked barely faster than human speed, in no hurry, holding hands. I was sick of being under a deadline, and I just wanted to take my time. Edward must have felt the same.

“I have to say, I’m thoroughly impressed with Jacob right now,” Edward told me.

“The wolves make quite an impact, don’t they?”

“That’s not what I mean. Not once today did he think about the fact that, according to Nahuel, Nessie will be fully matured in just six and a half years.”

I considered that for a minute. “He doesn’t see her that way. He’s not in a hurry for her to grow up. He just wants her to be happy.”

“I know. Like I said, impressive. It goes against the grain to say so, but she could do worse.”

I frowned. “I’m not going to think about that for approximately six and a half more years.”

Edward laughed and then sighed. “Of course, it looks like he’ll have some competition to worry about when the time comes.”

My frown deepened. “I noticed. I’m grateful to Nahuel for today, but all the staring was a little weird. I don’t care if she is the only half-vampire he’s not related to.”

“Oh, he wasn’t staring at her—he was staring at you.”

That's what it had seemed like… but that didn't make any sense. "Why would he do that?"

"Because you're alive," he said quietly.

"You lost me."

"All his life," he explained, "—and he's fifty years older than I am—"

"Decrepit," I interjected.

He ignored me. "He's always thought of himself as an evil creation, a murderer by nature. His sisters all killed their mothers as well, but they thought nothing of it. Joham raised them to think of the humans as animals, while they were gods. But Nahuel was taught by Huilen, and Huilen loved her sister more than anyone else. It shaped his whole perspective. And, in some ways, he truly hated himself."

"That's so sad," I murmured.

"And then he saw the three of us—and realized for the first time that just because he is half immortal, it doesn't mean he is inherently evil. He looks at me and sees… what his father should have been."

"You are fairly ideal in every way," I agreed.

He snorted and then was serious again. "He looks at you and sees the life his mother should have had."

"Poor Nahuel," I murmured, and then sighed because I knew I would never be able to think badly of him after this, no matter how uncomfortable his stare made me.

"Don't be sad for him. He's happy now. Today, he's finally begun to forgive himself."

I smiled for Nahuel's happiness and then thought that today belonged to happiness. Though Irina's sacrifice was a dark shadow against the white light, keeping the moment from perfection, the joy was impossible to deny. The life I'd fought for was safe again. My family was reunited. My daughter had a beautiful future stretching out endlessly in front of her. Tomorrow I would go see my father; he would see that the fear in my eyes had been replaced with joy, and he would be happy, too. Suddenly, I was sure that I wouldn't find him there alone. I hadn't been as observant as I might have been in the last few weeks, but in this moment it was like I'd known all along. Sue would be with Charlie—the werewolves' mom with the vampire's dad—and he wouldn't be alone anymore. I smiled widely at this new insight.

But most significant in this tidal wave of happiness was the surest fact of all: I was with Edward. Forever.

Not that I'd want to repeat the last several weeks, but I had to admit they'd made me appreciate what I had more than ever.

The cottage was a place of perfect peace in the silver-blue night. We carried Nessie to her bed and gently tucked her in. She smiled as she slept.

I took Aro's gift from around my neck and tossed it lightly into the corner of her room. She could play with it if she wished; she liked sparkly things. Edward and I walked slowly to our room, swinging our arms between us.

“A night for celebrations,” he murmured, and he put his hand under my chin to lift my lips to his.

“Wait,” I hesitated, pulling away.

He looked at me in confusion. As a general rule, I didn’t pull away. Okay, it was more than a general rule. This was a first.

“I want to try something,” I informed him, smiling slightly at his bewildered expression. I put my hands on both sides of his face and closed my eyes in concentration. I hadn’t done very well with this when Zafrina had tried to teach me before, but I knew my shield better now. I understood the part that fought against separation from me, the automatic instinct to preserve self above all else.

It still wasn’t anywhere near as easy as shielding other people along with myself. I felt the elastic recoil again as my shield fought to protect me. I had to strain to push it entirely away from me; it took all of my focus.

“Bella!” Edward whispered in shock.

I knew it was working then, so I concentrated even harder, dredging up the specific memories I’d saved for this moment, letting them flood my mind, and hopefully his as well.

Some of the memories were not clear—dim human memories, seen through weak eyes and heard through weak ears: the first time I’d seen his face… the way it felt when he’d held me in the meadow… the sound of his voice through the darkness of my

faltering consciousness when he'd saved me from James… his face as he waited under a canopy of flowers to marry me… every precious moment from the island… his cold hands touching our baby through my skin…

And the sharp memories, perfectly recalled: his face when I'd opened my eyes to my new life, to the endless dawn of immortality… that first kiss… that first night…

His lips, suddenly fierce against mine, broke my concentration. With a gasp, I lost my grip on the struggling weight I was holding away from myself. It snapped back like stressed elastic, protecting my thoughts once again.

"Oops, lost it!" I sighed.

"I heard you," he breathed. "How? How did you do that?"

"Zafrina's idea. We practiced with it a few times."

He was dazed. He blinked twice and shook his head.

"Now you know," I said lightly, and shrugged. "No one's ever loved anyone as much as I love you."

"You're almost right." He smiled, his eyes still a little wider than usual. "I know of just one exception."

"Liar."

He started to kiss me again, but then stopped abruptly.

"Can you do it again?" he wondered.

I grimaced. "It's very difficult."

He waited, his expression eager.

"I can't keep it up if I'm even the slightest bit distracted," I warned him.

"I'll be good," he promised.

I pursed my lips, my eyes narrowing. Then I smiled.

I pressed my hands to his face again, hefted the shield right out of my mind, and then started in where I'd left off—with the crystal-clear memory of the first night of my new life… lingering on the details.

I laughed breathlessly when his urgent kiss interrupted my efforts again.

"Damn it," he growled, kissing hungrily down the edge of my jaw.

"We have plenty of time to work on it," I reminded him.

"Forever and forever and forever," he murmured.

"That sounds exactly right to me."

And then we continued blissfully into this small but perfect piece of our forever.